A New World, Book 1

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Maribel and Renko's unexpected trip to the moon turns into an exile in Gensoukyo. How has the world of illusions evolved while cut off from humanity, and where do two girls from the scientific world fit in?

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Chapter 1

Maribel stared at the moons reflection in the pond. The ripples in the pool seemed to flow out across her vision. Her mind seemed to blur, pushing the boundaries of her own thoughts. She reached out and took her friends hand. "Well, Renko. If the Moon Tour is too expensive, shall we go there another way?" And then she stepped forward into the pool, towards the vision of the true moon that only her eyes could see…

There was a dark field, one that seemed to be full of red eyes. But Maribel wasn't scared. She knew they weren't looking at her to judge her. They were looking at her to tell them what reality was.

Then they were outside.

Maribel could only stand in awe. Fortunately Renko managed to pull herself together quickly. She stared at the sky for a few seconds before turning to her friend. "How did you do that? We're actually on the moon!" Looking around she said, "But this moon seems…"

Different was probably the word her friend was looking for. Behind them a pure blue sea lapped at the beach. In front of them was a grove of peach trees. The gravity seemed to be the same, and there was no lack of air. Yet Maribel's heart and Renko's eyes both agreed, they'd crossed over to the moon.

"I think this is the real moon Renko. The one where the rabbits pound mochi and the celestial maidens live." Maribel walked towards the orchards edge looking around. "Though I don't see anyone here."

Renko looked back over the ocean, then towards the sky again. "Hm… I guess I wouldn't be able to know the difference between the moons without having been to both. Still, how did we get here? And how will we get back?"

Maribel paused. She tried to think about what had happened. Her memory seemed to swirl around her actions. It was like trying to think about walking, it was so natural your brain didn't remember it, despite the fact that she had no idea how to do it again. The only thing that popped into her head was, "… the boundary of truth and lies."

"So up to your old tricks again?" came a stern voice from between the trees.

Striding from amidst the trees was a woman is fine robes. However unlike the celestial maidens of her boarder visions, this woman was not dancing happily but frowning while carrying a sword openly. To make the scene even more surreal there were a number of rabbit girls standing behind her, each armed with even stranger archaic weaponry. It looked like they'd pulled rifles out of a museum. It was wondrous, humorous, and terrifying all at the same time.

Still they couldn't just stand there. They should explain who they were at least, even if they could explain why they were there. Maribel wondered if she'd run into this woman in one of her boarder hopping dreams. "I'm sorry, my name is Maribel Hearn. I don't think we've met before?"

Renko moved to stand somewhat in front of Maribel. "And I'm Renko Usami. We're sorry to drop in on you, but we were talking about taking a trip to the moon and…" Renko looked at me and shrugged.

The lady frowned deeper, but lowered her blade. "You seem to be human. And the old Yakumo is supposed to be dead. Hm…" She seemed to think a bit then sighed and shrugged. "A little stranger then the normal spiriting away but whatever. I'm afraid I cannot let you stay on the moon. I'll take you to my estate, and my sister can send you back."

The two friends looked at each other. It seemed strange to have their hopes dashed once again after accomplishing the impossible.

"Excuse me, but why can't we visit here? Is it dangerous for humans?" Renko asked cautiously.

The noble looked at them with a surprised expression. "Because you are impure humans. We left the Earth because of the deadly impurities that infest it. If you stayed here too long you would bring death to our lunar capitol." Maribel saw Renko's face twitch. It was really quite annoying to hear those words said so matter of factly. "Besides, with your tours and colonies on the fake moon, humans aren't being viewed too favorably right now. You're lucky me and my sister Toyohime are used to sending people like you back to Earth. Now if I could just find her quickly…"

"No need for that Yorihime. I'm right here." Another well dressed woman carrying a fan walked out of the treeline. "Though I can't send them back just like normal."

Yorihime raised an eyebrow. "Why not? We can't keep them here."

Maribel blinked as Toyohime pointed her fan directly at the girl. "Because I'm quite sure that the young lady there did get here by her own power, and because they know they've reached the moon." Toyohime sighed. "So while I'm fairly sure these two girls wouldn't be able to convince anyone they actually found our home, they do have the ability to return with more people. And you know that we'd come under suspicion for letting them go."

Yorihime seemed to be struck by that reasoning. "Hm… So then. Do we have to kill them?" The casual tone in the lady's voice stung Maribel. Then she realized the lady was serious and she began to shake. Were they really going to kill them just for accidentally stumbling onto the moon? Perhaps they would. There had to be something she could do? Her eyes fell on her friend who seemed to be similarly panicking.

Maribel dropped to her knees. "Please. I'm the one that has the power that worries you so much. I brought Renko here without telling her, so she's innocent of any crime. I beg you to let her go."

Renko whirled on her in surprise. "What! I'm not going to just leave you alone here! Neither of us have committed any crime!" Her friend pointed at the two Lunar nobles. "You're the ones plotting to kill us for something we might do! How is that not 'impure?'"

Yorihime had the decency to look embarrassed at Renko's rant, but Toyohime just laughed. "You don't need to be so dramatic. I can't return you to your world. However dropping you in Gensoukyo should be fine. It's borders are sealed much tighter then our own these days, and you're unlikely to make an alliance with the youkai. That should do nicely."

"Hm… Some people won't be happy with that either," Yorihime commented.

Toyohime shrugged. "Some people are never happy with our work these days. Anyways if you two would like to leave this place…" She glanced at the girls.

Maribel's breath caught. At this point the emotional roller coaster of the conversation finally hit her and she teared up. She couldn't tell how much was from relief that they wouldn't be killed, anger over their helplessness, and happiness over finally reaching Gensoukyo, but she wasn't going to hesitate now. She moved up and grabbed Renko's hand again before nodding her acceptance. Renko looked more angry then relieved, but she nodded quickly as well.

There was an odd feeling, like they were moving very quickly despite not moving at all. Then they found themselves in front of a wrought iron fence. In front of the gate in the center of that fence was a woman wearing chinese garb. Her hair was silver, and her eyes green. At their abrupt appearance she dropped into a fighting stance, but before Maribel could even worry about being violently rejected again, the woman relaxed, then bowed.

Renko and Maribel hesitated for a moment then bowed politely in return. The woman straightened up, then said in a low, calm voice,

"Greetings honored travelers. I am Izayoi Huian the Gatekeeper of the Scarlet Devil Mansion. I offer you sanctuary in my lady's name."

Author's Notes: This is probably my second largest project to date. It started out as a simple idea, but then it snowballed into something much larger, but it's something I'm also a lot happier with. Some of the earlier segments are a little rusty due to the fact that I was still forming the ideas that would come later, but I've tweaked them enough that I'm happy with them for the most part.

Also the first "book" is done in it's entirety, so worry not about update speed.

As for more general notes: The first spoken lines come from the last CD Maribel and Renko appear in. While this story is far enough in the future to make "canon" something of a weak statement, I will reference CoLA later as well.

Chapter 2

Renko blinked. "Wait, Scarlet Devil Mansion? That doesn't sound all that safe."

Maribel had to agree with her friend at first. However something stirred at the back of her mind. "Renko, I think this is the place where the maid gave me those cookies. When I visited in my dreams."

The gatekeeper raised an eyebrow at that. "I don't recall meeting you before, and if you are human there's no chance that you could have entered the mansion without me knowing." She then frowned. "However, I suppose stranger things have happened."

"In any case, while the lady of the house is a vampire, she would be terribly bored without the occasional human guest. You have my word that you will be safe from harm all this night, and you will be escorted back to the village. A far better deal then the other youkai are likely to give you."

Maribel looked at Renko to find her friend gazing back at her. They nodded to each other once. It was a better deal then the last one. Renko stepped forward and bowed again. "Thanks for your hospitality. Please take care of us."

Huian bowed again in reply, then opened the gates. "Please follow me." The gatekeeper began walking across the gardens towards the mansion. Meribel and Renko carefully followed after her down the path through the rose and lilac bushes.

As the trio reached the doors they swung open seemingly by themselves. The effect was impressive, but it was ruined slightly by the distortion in Maribel's eyes. She paused, staring at the oddity. "What's wrong?" Renko asked.

Maribel peered at the distortion more. "The boundary of… space. Yes. Space is wrong in there."

Huian blinked then gave Maribel an appraising stare. "Interesting. Most humans from the outside world aren't as in tune with their powers as you seem to be. Yes, the space within the mansion is distorted to make it larger on the inside then on the outside. We need that to house the library."

The sheer impossibility of that would have normally caused Maribel to start asking dozens of questions, but today impossible events seemed to becoming commonplace. Instead she just nodded in acceptance. Renko seemed to be pondering the matter, but she was silent as well.

Huian turned back towards the now open doors. "The upper floors have been increased in size as well, so please don't wander about too much. I'll show you to the guest room."

As the trio walked through the doors they quietly closed. This time the girls could see two maids with fairy wings operating them. The mansion itself was well lit, yet still dark because of the crimson wallpaper. The two girls noted that the lights were simple freestanding globes as they followed their guide.

Eventually Huian opened one of the many doors, leading to a sitting room. This room favored white, making it seem far brighter then the hallways. Inside was a woman in a nightgown. The lady had small black bat wings, strawberry blond hair and a languid expression. In her off hand she carried a book. She stood and nodded to the two girls at the doorway, before turning to Huian. "Who are our guests?"

The gatekeeper's calm expression turned to dismay. "Whoops. Uh…"

"You didn't ask," the woman said with a grin. She smiled brightly. "You should be more careful, Huian."

Renko coughed. "I'm Renko Usami," she stated to prevent their guide from further embarrassment.

"And I'm Maribel Hearn," Mary added.

The woman's expression evened out again. "A pleasure to meet you both. I'm Dinah Margatroid, assistant librarian of the mansion." She looked at the gatekeeper. "Will you be joining us Huian?"

Huian shook her head. "No. I should return to my post until the mistress has finished eating dinner." She bowed first to Dinah, then to Mary and Renko. "Dinah will be able to show you to the dining room."

Dinah sighed. "Oh well. I'll be sure to tell you anything interesting that happens." She turned back to the waiting girls as the gate guard left. "I'm sure you two have had a fairly confusing journey, and you probably want to take stock of your situation. Feel free to converse by yourselves until you feel up to asking me questions."

Maribel sighed and sat down on one of the sofas. Renko sat down beside her, while their host sat back down in her chair. There was a long pause as the two girls tried to think of what to say.

Renko acted first. She was always good at getting her bearings, even without the stars. "So, um, are you a vampire?"

Dinah blinked, then laughed. "Oh, no. I'm a magician, though I do have devil blood in me. You'll know when you meet the mistress of the house. She's fairly unique." She smiled wider. "So you don't need to worry about me drinking your blood or anything."

Renko laughed nervously. "I wasn't worrying about that. Promise!"

Maribel smiled and shook her head. Turning to her host she asked, "Is this really Gensoukyo? I'd dreamed of this place, this mansion before, but it was slightly different."

The magician blinked. "Yes this is Gensoukyo. I'm surprised you speak of 'before' though. The borders have been tightly bound for the last three hundred years, ever since the Yakumo died. I doubt a dreamer would be able to pass through. Perhaps you were displaced? Tell me, do you have any powers related to time?"

Maribel shook her head. "No. I can see boundaries though. Renko's the one who can always tell what time it is." She glanced at her friend. "Though she still manages to always be late."

Renko shrugged. "I'm bad at judging how long things will take." She frowned. "But are you sure you can't do more then that now Renko? You somehow sent us to the moon. And not our moon either"

Dinah leaned forward and carefully shut her book. "You managed to travel to the true moon?"

Maribel and Renko nodded. "Though we almost got killed because of it," Maribel said sadly.

Dinah set her book aside. "I see… Forgive me, but would you mind telling me about it? We youkai don't exactly have favorable relations with the moon, and the Scarlet Devil Mansion more so. I would not expect them to send humans here."

"Sure," Renko replied. "There's not much to say though." The girl proceeded to explain their desire to visit the moon, and the disastrous success that followed. Maribel added what she could to the tale.

"So," Renko finished. "We don't really know ourselves what's going on. At all. We were hoping to find someone that might be able to help us."

Dinah thought for a moment. "I should inform my parents about this. I hate to leave you in the lurch, but they'd know more about the moon, and about such powers. They'd be better suited for answering your questions." She waved her hand and a pitcher and two glasses

appeared. "Feel free to have some water while you wait. It shouldn't be too long."

The winged magician glided out of the room leaving Maribel and Renko to their own devices.

After a bit of silence Mary turned to her friend. "Um, about what happened on the moon. I'm sorry Renko. I shouldn't have dragged…"

"You should be sorry." Renko said poking her friend in the chest. Mary flinched back as Renko continued. "What the hell was with you trying to sacrifice yourself for me back on the moon?"

Maribel gaped in confusion. "But… but I brought you into that mess! You almost got killed because of me!"

"But we didn't get killed." Renko said. "Besides, we didn't know it was that dangerous. I would have jumped for this chance even if you had told me we were going to the moon beforehand. So don't you dare try to leave me behind again. We're in this together. Alright?"

Maribel blinked for a few moments. Then the tears broke through, and she embraced her friend tightly. She tried to apologize, to explain herself, but only sobs came out. Renko simply held her close. "Shh… It's okay. I understand."

After a long while Maribel managed to recover. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I didn't like being held at sword point either." Renko managed a weak smile. "Just be there to catch me when I crash, okay."

Maribel smiled, and wiped away a few more tears. "Sure."

"Here." Renko handed her friend a napkin from next to the water pitcher.

Maribel nodded her thanks then wiped her face and blew her nose. She then poured two cups of water. "So now that I've had my breakdown for today, what should we do?"

Renko thought a bit. "We need to find out where we can go after today, and then how we can survive. After that we need to figure out if there's a way to get back home."

Maribel managed a weak laugh. "We finally make it to Gensoukyo and the first thing we think to do is run away… How strange."

"We're not running away," Renko protested. "We're keeping our options open. Besides, maybe we can find a passage back and forth. We haven't even started our explorations on this side of the border!"

"Very well then." Maribel said. "Today's sealing club mission is 'learn how to live in Gensoukyo.'"

"That's the spirit," a voice said from the doorway.

The two girls turned to find a woman, apparently in her 20s, wearing what could only be described as a witch costume standing there. "Yo," the witch said. "The name's Marisa Kirisame. Dinah told us about your situation, so we're going to have a meeting to see how to help deal with it." Marisa smiled broadly. "And so you and the lady of the house don't get bored if it goes into magical esoterica, we'll have dinner too."

Notes: And a familiar face appears. With it I can state: worry not, most of the youkai you know and love are still alive (500 years? pshaw) and will be making an appearance.

Maribel visited the mansion in Changeability of Strange Dream and brought Sakuya's cookies back with her.

I've edited these earlier portions a lot, mainly because the first time I wrote them i had very little direction, and thus focused a little too

much on minor details. The SDM will have a part to play, but our heroines are Mary and Renko, so I removed some of the by plays that would distract from the leads for little return.

Chapter 3

The dining room was a chaotic mess.

Not physically. Physically everything was in it's proper place. But the people in there were all over the place.

In addition to the "ordinary witch" who had led them to the dining hall and Dinah, there were three other women, all who appeared to be around the same age. The one named Koakuma was obviously related to Dinah, sharing the other girl's bat wings. The other two were apparently Alice Margetroid, who was sipping tea while a passel of dolls swarmed around her futzing with various objects, and Patchouli Knowledge, who was reading a massive tome.

As soon as Maribel and Renko had sat down the questions had started.

"What's the status of Shintoism in Japan these days?"

"How far along is the Mars program?"

"Did China ever reunify? How about Korea?"

"Have they gained any further insight into the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle?"

There was no pressure, but little rhyme or reasoning to the questions. And every now and then two or three of them would break off into a side discussion. The one thing Maribel did notice was that Dinah seemed to show deference to all the other women. She didn't look younger, but she acted younger.

Still none of these answered the questions she had. So finally, after all six of the other women had started talking about quantum mechanics she interrupted. "I'm sorry, but I really would like to know what's happening to us. And what we're supposed to do next."

Renko paused then nodded. "Yeah. Not that I don't like talking about the stuff I learned in class, but we do have bigger issues right now."

Patchouli set down her book and looked at them directly for the first time. "Hm… We're waiting for the mistress of the house to awaken before we go into why you might be here, but I suppose we can tell you what you should do next."

Marisa nodded her approval. "It's not like anyone will care if they miss that part of the conversation." The witch returned to fiddling with her tea spoon. "You want to give the speech Alice?"

"I suppose I could." The swirl of dolls around Alice slowed until only one doll was still active. "You are in Gensoukyo. The illusionary world that is refuge to youkai and spiritually active humans alike. Sadly, currently Gensoukyo's boundaries are too strong. Few humans cross over naturally, and willingly crossing the barrier is considered impossible currently."

Renko frowned. "But Mary's been here in her dreams before."

Patchouli flipped a page. "She's appeared in a mental state. The barrier displaced her temporally to a time when it wasn't as strong as a way to bleed off stress. That doesn't work with living physical travelers I'm afraid. It's far easier for the barrier to just erase your physical forms, or rip your souls out."

"Yes. The only way you were able to cross over physically is because the barrier between us and the true moon is far thinner." The puppeteer paused for a moment before continuing in a sympathetic voice. "I'm afraid you probably will not be able to return to your homes."

Mary probably should have been more stunned by that announcement, but she was too tired to be severely shocked by mere words at this point. Still, there was a dull ache at the thought of not being able to see her family again. She wondered if that would become worse later.

Then she felt Renko's hand enveloping hers. She turned and smiled at her friend. She wasn't totally alone here at least.

Seeing the two recover Alice continued. "Fortunately you arrived here, instead of out in the wilderness where youkai hunt humans as food."

"Probably one of the safest places outside of the temple or the village itself," Koakuma stated.

Maribel thought for a moment. "I remember a village. Faintly. It seemed like a happy place."

Marisa frowned for a moment. "I suppose. Really depends on what kind of person you are."

"I think they'll have an easier time of it then we would," Patchouli stated calmly. "Talents are appreciated. It's the drive to pursue magic to it's fullest that draws fear for some reason."

"Huh, so then most of the villagers have a power like me and Mary?" Renko asked.

"Usually stronger actually," Alice replied. "Though perhaps with training you could surpass the average villager."

"In any case should you choose to go there we'll supply an escort. You shouldn't worry about short term lodging either. Keine will be happy to give you room and board while you settle yourselves. Though she'll probably have you do some odd jobs here and there."

"'Should we choose to go there?'" Renko asked.

Koakuma nodded. "That explanation we'll want to wait on the mistress of the house for."

"And she should be arriving shortly."

Mary and Renko turned to see another blond woman in a maid uniform enter into the room. She was holding a tray with a large chocolate cake and two bowls of stew on it. The maid placed the two bowls of stew in front of the girls from outside, before curtsying. "Juri Kirisame, head maid of the mansion. My apologies for not meeting with you sooner, but I was busy with the cleaning."

"Ah, don't worry about it. And thank you for the food," Maribel said.

Renko nodded. "Yeah, it's been too long since we ate."

Marisa eyed the cake. "Aren't you splurging a little here?"

Juri raised an eyebrow. "It's not like we're in poor financial straights. You need to let your miserly ways go father."

"I told you not to call me that." Marisa muttered darkly. "And it's not about the cake mix. It's about the blood." Maribel suddenly felt less hungry. Her appetite didn't improve as the argument continued.

Juri smiled wickedly. "It's not like blood keeps. We have two new donors as well. Besides, just because you never gained the taste for it, doesn't meant the rest of us don't enjoy it."

"Leave me out of this, sister." Dinah snapped. "Besides, you're scaring the humans."

Alice sighed. "I don't need any sibling rivalry!" She turned to Marisa. "Or any father daughter sniping either."

"Yes mother," the two girls chorused. Marisa just snorted and looked away.

Koakuma laughed nervously and turned to the human girls. "Um, to explain. Most youkai don't need to actually eat food. So the cake is mostly just for taste. That's why Juri prepared a separate meal for you. As for the donor bit…"

"Ooh! Don't steal that part from me! That's the fun line!"

There was a tinkling from the doorway as a young girl with strange crystalline wings stepped through. She stared at Mary and Renko with obvious interest. At her entrance the maid curtsied again. "May I present the mistress of the Scarlet Devil Mansion. Flandre Scarlet."

Their host grinned widely as she took her seat at the head of the table. "I'm glad you could come visit my mansion. It's boring only talking to the same people all the time. And your story sounds fun! I missed going to the moon last time."

Maribel managed a weak laugh. "Well it was certainly exciting. And we thank you for your hospitality."

Flandre nodded, then started rocking back and forth in her chair, her wings sounding like wind chimes. "I'd like to say that you made up for it by being here and telling me your story," the vampire suddenly leaned forward, and her grin turned predatory "… but unlike other youkai we vampires DO need to eat."

Maribel's heart briefly considered an escape attempt.

Then Flandre giggled and leaned back again, "But I think humans are more fun alive and talking then as food, and my big sister thought that way too, so we just ask for donations! A bit of blood will cover us protecting you today. And if you two give us a little bit of blood every month, we'll help protect you from the other youkai later as well!"

"Most of the fishermen and woodsmen are under our protection these days, which is why my Lady doesn't hunt," Juri added.

"Just as a question, what happens if we refuse?" Renko asked.

"Nothing," Flandre said. "We just don't give you an escort to town, and don't warn the other youkai off."

There was no need to ask what no escort into town actually meant, but Maribel couldn't really argue it was unfair, and being protected from youkai for the rest of their stay seemed fair. Maribel was just about to agree when Renko put a hand on her shoulder. "I can't speak for Mary, but I'll simply pay my debt for today. I'll take my chances once we get to the village."

Maribel blinked. Now that Renko had said that she realized it was a little stupid to promise to give blood every month for a service that they might not need. "Ah yes. Me as well."

There was a long pause as everyone else in the room looked at the two outsiders. Patchouli actually closed her book and stared, while the dolls behind Alice began 'chatting' with each other.

The quiet moment was shattered when Flandre giggled again. "Oh! That's impressive! Now I'm even more interested." She pointed at the two. "Why don't you two become my maids?"

"The pay is good, and we can magically aid you in mastering your talents," Patchouli added.

"Um, no offense, but I think we'll at least want to see the village before we agree to that," Maribel stated.

"Darn." Flandre slumped a bit. Then she brightened back up. "Oh well. I suppose I already have the best maid anyway." The vampire leaned over and gave Juri a squeeze while the maid glowed with pride. Marisa just coughed.

"Anyway, I suppose you'll want to hear about the moon, and maybe what we can guess about your powers before you retire for the night," the magician stated while Juri served their host a large slice of the cake. The two outside girls took that as their cue to start eating as well. "First the moon…"

Patchouli reopened her book. "The Lunarians owe their existence to an obsession with 'purity.' By removing themselves from the earth

and it's struggles they have removed themselves from time. In effect they've created their own realm much like Gensoukyo. Except while Gensoukyo feeds off the worlds disbelief of magical creatures, the moon works by mimicking the utopia of the celestial heavens. Though that's a incredible simplification of structures."

Renko snorted. "It didn't look much like a utopia to me."

"Well that's because you're an outsider. It's far more pleasant for the inhabitants," Koakuma stated.

"Though I imagine it's starting to fall down around their ears now," Marisa said with a hint of malice.

Dinah nodded. "In any case, as you've seen yourself 'purity' is a very vague term. We youkai are vessels of impurity no matter how kind and nice we are, while celestials and most gods are pure no matter how terrible they act. Lunarians are a little different in that they have to work to remain pure, but killing impure beings, like say humans or youkai, for the benefit of pure beings such as themselves is considered a pure act."

Maribel felt a surprising surge of anger at those words. "That doesn't seem right," she snapped out. She felt Renko give her an odd look, so she took a few breaths to calm down.

Flandre finished a bite of cake then nodded. "Yeah. The Lunarians are stuck up jerks. I kinda wish I'd have gone with big sis and Marisa so I could 'pop' one to teach them manners." Flandre made a grasping motion and the flower piece in the center of the table exploded into petals. "But I suppose it's best to just let them put about the moon and worry about humans instead of bothering us."

Juri sighed and waved her hand. At that a set of child sized dolls modeled after fairies began cleaning the mess.

Kokuma shrugged. "So in short, no one really likes them, and you'll probably never have to deal with them again. But if you don't want to

hear people complaining about 'those aliens,' don't mention you've met them."

Maribel nodded. "And what about our abilities?"

"You have the power to manipulate boundaries now," Marisa said simply. "Same as Yukari Yakumo. Get used to that name, you'll be hearing it a lot."

"Who is Yukari Yakumo?" Maribel asked.

"It's said she's the one responsible for creating Gensoukyo, though even if that isn't true she was definitely the one responsible for maintaining it," Alice replied. "She passed away three hundred years ago, but she's still left a big mark on Gensoukyo. You seem to have acquired her looks and taste in fashion in addition to her powers."

"Acquired?" Renko asked.

Patchouli responded this time. "There's a 55% chance she is a reincarnation, and a 30% chance she's a descendant. Non exclusive of course."

Flandre nodded. "Really it's the only way to explain the hat. Why would you want a figure 8 bow on it?"

Maribel frowned. "What's strange about my hat? I like this type of bow!"

"What about me? What's my power become?" asked Renko.

Patchouli shrugged. "It seems to be the same as it was in the outside world. You know where and when you are."

Renko drooped. "Uh, that's it?"

"Sorry," Marisa said sympathetically, "not all of us get the cool powers. Heck you're doing better then I was at that age. Though maybe with effort you can become good at magic."

This time it was Maribel's turn to comfort her friend. "Don't worry Renko, I'm sure you'll find something you can excel at here."

"Smaller chest, lamer power, and now my degree's useless…" Renko muttered before sighing and smiling again. "Oh well. I guess we'll figure something out, right?"

"Right!" Mary said.

The talk turned to more mundane questions. After some time, Maribel and Renko finished their dinner, then magically donated a half pint of blood each, before Juri showed them to a guest room.

Authors notes: This was two updates in it's original form (as indicated by the line) but I wanted a more substantial update over the cliffhanger, lovely as it is.

Chapter 4

The talk turned to more mundane questions. After some time, Maribel and Renko finished their dinner, then magically donated a half pint of blood each before Juri showed them to a guest room.

Marisa looked around the room now that their guests had cleared off. "So what was that back there? No one who's shown up here has been able to refuse the long term contract before."

Flandre shrugged. "She just had strong willpower is all. It happens."

"What about Remilia?" asked Alice. "If they couldn't resist being drawn here how could they resist the offer? Maybe they arrived by chance?"

"Hmph." Falndre looked at the magician crossly. "You shouldn't trust big sister's power so implicitly. She spent a lot of time convincing other to overestimate her abilities. Big sister was always weak. That's why she spent so much time studying magic and martial arts. She's the weakest vampire in Gensoukyo by far."

"That's unlikely lady Flandre. You know your sister's power is vastly increased now that she's lying in torpor. With her body in stasis her mind's power should have tripled." Dinah said. "And it was her power that brought them here, I could sense that. If you're weak enough to be affected by Remilia's power, you shouldn't be able to break free later."

Patchouli shook her head. "That's not entirely true, Dinah. If you have a good reason to resist Remi's power you can break free far more easily then if you don't. However, resistance increases with the presence of fear, pride or other strong emotions. Not with logic and reason. If they were terrified of giving blood it would make sense. But that Renko girl simply ignored Remilia's power by thinking it through."

Marisa's eyes narrowed. "You lied to her about her power didn't you? Is she one of those people that enforces scientific reality?"

"Hardly. I told the entire truth. She only has the ability to see where and when she is," Patchouli stated. There was a long pause as everyone else tried to follow the logic.

"Ah!" Koakuma said. "And she trusts her eyes implicitly!"

Patchouli nodded.

"I get it." Marisa said. "That's a pretty neat trick actually."

Flandre pouted. "And they won't be my maids. How sad…"

"Probably for the best," Alice commented before finishing the hat for a doll that looked suspiciously like Renko. "If the rest of Gensoukyo knew we'd gotten someone with Yukari Yakumo's power as a servant it would probably start a war."

"I know." Flandre said with a wicked smile. "I think that might be just the thing to make big sister wake up."

"Leave Remi in peace!" Patchouli snapped. "She's still dealing with loosing those two."

"It's been 300 years! She needs to move on!" Flandre returned.

Marisa rubbed her eyes. "You two both know she's probably staying in torpor so you have enough blood to use your adult form constantly Flan." Marisa glared at the younger vampire. "Which you continue to refuse to do."

Flandre looked away, "Maybe I don't want to. I don't need any more power anyway. I'm the most powerful youkai in existence."

There was another long pause around the table. A silent argument that had been played out too many times to bother repeating again.

Finally Flandre said, "Well I guess we'll just have to keep working on getting more contracts. If we can get enough blood without hunting she'll return. Or else I'll smack her through the floor!"

"In the meantime," Alice stated, "we should keep a close eye on those two. Right now my guess is that girl has no control, but if that ever changes, we'll want her to think of us as allies. And since it's in our best interests to have someone like that around, I think it would be good to aid her progress."

Everyone at the table nodded. But it was Patchouli who raised the next point. "And that may bring us to war too. Though it's less likely."

"It doesn't matter," Flandre stated proudly. "Because we are the strongest house in Gensoukyo. In both power and allies."

The other magicians seemed to consider the matter, but Alice returned Flandre's cold smile. "I suppose that's true."

Renko paced back and forth across the room that she and Mary had been led to. Much like the rest of the mansion, it was unnecessarily huge by any standard. It contained it's own wardrobe, closet, bathroom and table set. As well as a massive bed, which Mary was quite sensibly occupying.

Renko on the other hand couldn't sleep.

Her mind kept running over the events of today. And whenever she managed to get those out of her head, she started worrying about what the future would bring.

She was ashamed that she couldn't actually DO anything during this whole day, as people vastly more powerful then them bounced them about from place to place. She was excited to be here, in Gensoukyo, a land where magic was real. And on the other hand she was disappointed in how little magic she'd actually run into. The doll tricks were nice, but she'd expected a little more magic from a

group of magicians, and she had a sneaking suspicion that the only magic she'd be seeing in this 'human village' would be little tricks to help plants grow.

And somewhere in the back of her mind she was realizing that she wasn't going to be sending a Christmas card home this year. Or any other.

She wondered what her family was thinking. When they'd even realize she was gone…

Her mind swirled back and forth, from one worry to another. Every time she tried to think about something different it would morph into one of her issues.

Two hands softly caught her by the shoulders and pulled her down to sit on the bed. "I guess it's time for me to help you with your breakdown, Renko."

Renko managed a weak smile. "Thanks Mary."

Renko sighed as Mary began massaging her shoulders. She was terrible at it, but it still helped take Renko's mind off of all the uncertainty that had been dumped on her today.

After a few minuted Maribel spoke. "You know, your breakdown seems to be a lot less pathetic then mine."

"Yeah, but I bet it'll last a couple of weeks," Renko said with a sigh.

Maribel just hugged her in response. Renko sighed again and tried to think on better times.

After a while she realized Mary had fallen asleep on her.

Smiling at her friend, she very cautiously moved Mary back to the top of the bed and tucked her under the covers, before finally trying to get to sleep herself.

It took a while, and her sleep was fitful, but having Mary beside her allowed Renko to pretend this was all just another club trip. At least enough to get some rest.

Yorihime frowned as she entered Tsukiyomi's court. If there was undeniable sign to Yorihime's mind that the moon was becoming impure, it was the increase in politics. For the longest time kicking someone off the moon was just something she and her sister did, no questions asked. NOW there had to be an official report.

Thus a perfectly good chunk of her time was going to be spent telling Lord Tsukiyomi in public that the humans still didn't know how to break the barrier. Then if she was unlucky she'd have to listen to some big speeches from people who needed to feel important. At least Lord Tsukiyomi himself would just nod and let her do her job. But the public demanded he go through the motions of an inquiry, and as a wise ruler Lord Tsukiyomi knew better then to challenge the public unless necessary.

Toyohime giggled slightly beside her. "You're worrying too much sister. This is just like the other briefings. Nothing will come of it except rumors from the rabbits."

"Ah, lovely peach lady, I fear you may be underestimating how much worry there is in the capitol. My glorious bride is right to look so concerned."

Yorihime blinked and turned towards the voice. "Sareseno! When did you show up?"

"Just now," her husband replied. "I thought it fitting to accompany my hard working wife today. For moral support."

"How nice of you. If my husband isn't too busy with his experiments perhaps we could have a picnic later," Toyohime said.

Yorihime just narrowed her eyes. While she'd first thought that her husband was a frivolous fool, she'd rapidly learned he was actually one of the moon's finest speakers. While he hid his goals behind a smile and poetry, he was always aware of the mood of the people. That he was here indicated he thought Yorihime needed the support.

Finally she asked. "What's gotten everyone riled up? It can't be those kids. We checked to make sure they hadn't corrupted anything after we sent them out, and the rabbits are doing a full sweep to avoid any incidents like the last."

"I'm afraid there are two things working against you today. The first, is this." Her husband pulled out a beautiful jeweled branch. The Hourai tree, which only flowered when exposed to impurity. This one was a little duller then the ones that blossomed on earth, but it was still in bloom.

Toyohime frowned. "That's not from anywhere near where we were."

Sareseno nodded. "Yes. The opposite side of the lunar capitol in fact. That makes it more frightening, since the barrier is weakening. Fortunately this was at the outskirts, beyond our serious protective wards. Still, I expect a lot of people to be afraid."

"And second?" Yorihime asked.

Her husband smiled sympathetically. "That, I'm afraid I shouldn't tell you. Your reaction will seem more sincere if you're surprised by it's stupidity."

"Oh wonderful." Yorihime finally sighed. "Well I suppose we should get this over with quickly then. So we can prepare for the next dumb idea."

"Don't worry too much." Yorihime relaxed slightly as her husband patted her shoulder. "Lord Tsukiyomi still trusts you. And when he speaks the matter is over."

Yorihime found some comfort in that. Still it meant that they'd have to sit and listen to the public's stupidity beforehand. As she entered the court and kneeled before the lord of the moon she took a moment to reflect on some of the oddities that had continued throughout the moons politics.

"We thank you for taking time from your schedule to speak with us. We have many questions we wish to be answered." Lord Tsukiyomi began. "Perhaps you could explain what happened with the incursion today?"

This was the first oddity. She'd sent a full report in immediately, and she was sure that the rabbits had given their versions of the tale to anyone who would listen. However it was the lords duty to ask directly, in order to make it seem like this was an actual discussion, instead of a combination forum and public announcement of policy.

"I would be a bit arrogant to call this an incursion my Lord. Sometimes random events occur, and today one such random event brought two inhabitants of Earth to the moon. They have no connection to the world governments, and they were sent back without bloodshed or even much fuss."

She was a little surprised when Toyohime continued. "In addition because of current incidents we decided to send them to Gensoukyo instead of back to the scientific earth. That way there is no chance of further contamination."

There was a muttering from the crowd at that point, which caused lord Tsukiyomi to raise an eyebrow. "This answers my questions, especially in regards to the contamination in the other parts of the city. However, there is perhaps something I missed lord Tenshou?"

Yorihime gave the man a calculating look as he stood. He was dressed as the head of a family, but he obviously wasn't one of the original Lunarians. In addition his eyes had a dangerous light. One that she hadn't seen in a very long while.

"While we appreciate the swift resolution of the incident of course, there are some things that seem to be missing. Firstly we heard that one of the Earthlings in question had the ability to move between the Earth and the Moon." The sisters both twitched in surprise at that. "Second we worry about the possibility of them joining forces with the youkai to again intrude on our home."

"What?" Yorihime stared at the man. She couldn't believe the man's stupidity.

Toyohime laughed. "Then I'm sure you shall be relieved to know that there's no chance of the youkai allying with each other these days, much less putting off eating a human long enough to figure out if she's actually got special boundary powers. Something she currently has no training or skill in."

"Seriously," Yorihime snorted. "Now that there's no supply of human corpses coming in from the outside, the great houses of Gensoukyo are more likely to eat each other then invade us again. And it's not like they'd have a chance of success even if they tried."

The man seemed undaunted by the sisters retorts. "There's one person who could accomplish such a thing. Your old mentor and the traitor to the moon, Eirin Yagokoro!"

There was a deadly silence in the chambers.

"You idiot!" Yorihime exploded. "Eirin Yagakoro doesn't NEED any help to try to bring us to ruin. Did you forget who created most of our technology, including our weapons? Do you think she somehow needs a human with strange powers to get to the moon? She knows that as soon as she tried to unify any significant group of youkai under her banner we'd have to destroy her, just like we SHOULD know that attacking her in her own home is likely a death sentence. Hell, Eirin is our best agent on the Earth just because she knows we can cause each other irreparable harm! I'm…"

"That is enough, Yorihime," said Lord Tsukiyomi.

She fumed a bit more before returning to her seat. "Sorry my Lord."

Lord Tsukiyomi gave her e reprimanding glare, then returned his attention to the crowd. "Still I feel my advisers words are correct. Eirin Yagokoro has worked on our behalf many times since her exile. Sometimes without us even asking for her assistance. While this does not forgive her actions, it makes me unwilling to make a threat out of someone who seems perfectly fine living in exile."

The crowd quieted, though the man who had spoken out seemed to still be displeased. In the end though their Lords words were law. He had to sit around and wait for someone to suggest what he wanted done, in order to save face if the idea failed, but when he supported a plan, that plan would be put into practice.

Lord Tsukiyomi folded his fan shut. "I see no reason not to trust my chosen generals, though I do wish for the both of you to make a plan for if the barrier continues to degrade."

The sisters bowed. "Yes my Lord."

There were a few more meaningless formalities, then the court adjourned.

Yorihime maintained her composure until they'd exited the palace grounds. "Alright Saresano, who are those idiots!"

Her husband frowned eloquently. "A serious problem for the moon I fear. You remember the Tachibana family?"

Yorihime nodded. The Tachibana had been the largest family on the moon for some time. In fact, they had caused one of the few crisis on the moon.

The source of that problem was simple. Lunarians lived forever, but they were still to some degree humans. Thus they had human birthrates.

One of the few things keeping the moon from being totally overrun by Lunarians was the fact that, as a race entirely of nobility, they'd stuck to the tradition of arranged marriages. Yorihime didn't hate her husband. But she didn't live in the same building as him either. For a more dramatic example, Toyohime's husband hadn't left his lab for over 4 years. In fact her sister had once managed to hide a human in her own house back in the past without anyone becoming the wiser. This distance was true for a lot of marriages on the moon, and everyone was politely discreet about the ways they handled it.

Of course, as luck would have it, some arranged marriages did blossom into true love. That was always a nice thing. However when true love was combined with a lack of family planning, things got a little out of control.

For example the Tachibana family. The Tachibana had exploded into a huge clan within three centuries. There were fear if this continued they'd fill the moon entirely. "Suggestions" on how many children were harmonious had to be loudly proclaimed. And in order to prevent the family from becoming far too powerful it was split into several branches.

The fix had been relatively painless and accepted by all, but it had left an indelible mark on lunar society.

Toyohime sighed. "So they're one of the branch families. So they're powerful, but that doesn't explain their stupidity, or hatred."

"I'm afraid they aren't as stupid as you think." Sareseno shook his head sadly. "You see, their goal is to exterminate Gensoukyo, and possibly most of humanity as well. So long as you two retain your positions that's… unlikely. So anything that weakens your authority is useful."

"Why would they want to…" Yorihime paused as she realized the answer to her question. "They lost their family head during the invasion didn't they?"

"Worse. It was the old Tachibana head."

Yorihime looked back at the court. "So now that we've got more reason to consider a wipe of the Earth they'll be pushing their personal agenda won't they?"

"I'm afraid so. Your plan had best include a purge of the youkai, or a very good reason not to start one. Otherwise you'll find a lot more political maneuverings in your future," her husband stated.

"It's worse then that." Yorihime and her husband looked over at Toyohime. "I'm afraid that this is also a sign of corruption within us as a people. While killing youkai is the same as killing bugs, desiring such petty revenge on a species is an impure thought."

Toyohime looked up at the starry sky. "I fear, if nothing changes, we may soon need to leave the moon."

There was a long pause as the three Lunarians considered those words.

Finally Sareseno managed a smile. "Well we should enjoy the view while it lasts then. Perhaps you could both join me on that picnic?"

Notes: Next up, leaving the SDM and a few more familiar faces.

A thanks to all those who've read, and another thanks to those of you who sent in a review.

My thoughts on Lunarian society, come from CiLR, especially chapter 3 which has the modified story of Urashima Taro.

I imagine several people are still confused about the magician's relationship web. The reason I didn't make it clearer (and in fact removed some other relationship stuff) is because it's really not important from Maribel and Renko's current perspective, and it didn't advance the story. However, for those readers still curious, the

simple version is: Koakuma won the matter, and they are in a group relationship.

Youkai have varying views on relationships, with some being almost more obsessive about marriage then humans (Tengu, Crow youkai), some not caring about such matters (nekomata) and some considering it part of a meal (yuki-no-onna). Patchy and Alice care a little less about monogamy, as Patchy comes from a line of outside world Magicians who had limited choice in equally long lived partners, and Alice learned social mores in Makai.

Juri is Marisa and Alice's child and took up the role of maid because she idolized Sakuya as a kid. Dinah is Koakuma's and Alice's child and is a more focused magician. There are other kids, but they are in Makai and have no place in the story, and thus shall remain entirely within the lockback I have for unessential Touhou OCs.

Chapter 5

Renko's worries had returned by the time breakfast was served. It didn't help that the only person there was Juri, who was rather quiet. She just brought in the food, stood aside while two dolls dressed as fairy maids served it, then bowed and returned to the corner. Mary had attempted some small talk, but the meal was still mostly silent.

After they finished Juri bowed again. "Now that your finished I'll send for Huian. The lady of the house wishes regrets she can't see you out herself, but she tends to sleep with the dawn. Is there anything you need to retrieve, or anything you wish to do here?"

Renko and Mary shook their heads. "No I think we're ready."

Juri paused for a moment then asked, "I don't suppose you've reconsidered my Lady's offer? I believe you two would make a fine addition to the household."

"Er, I think I want to see if I can get a job closer to my degree before I give up and become a maid," Renko replied.

Mary smiled. "And I want to see the village in person."

Juri sighed. "Very well. If you two do change your minds please speak with me or Huian when we're at market."

"Sure." Renko had no idea what could make her change her mind, but the offer was nice.

The door opened and the silver haired woman who had first greeted them entered. "Ah, hello again." She bowed. "I'll be escorting you to the village, so you don't need to worry about an incidents on the trip."

"Thank you," said Mary.

The two girls followed the gate guard to the front of the mansion.

As Renko walked out into the bright Gensoukyo day her worries began to fade to the back of her mind. Now that she was thinking a little more clearly she could see the beautiful garden, composed entirely of natural plants. And beyond that a real forest. The air was heavy with bird song, none of which the two girls had heard before.

Renko looked up at the sky. "Is that a crested Ibis?"

Huian nodded. "Yes. They taste pretty good with red miso."

"You eat them?" Mary asked in shock. "But there aren't any in the outside world…"

Huian shrugged. "They're very common here." The gatekeeper then turned and began walking down a very faint trail. Renko and Maribel shrugged then moved on.

As they progressed through the woods they started trying to guess what the natural plants were. Sometimes Huian would casually toss out an answer, but most of the plants were very similar to their genetically engineered counterparts in the outside world. Eventually though they passed a patch of plants with spiky fruits that had them stumped.

"I think it's a western plant," Renko finally said.

Maribel frowned. "Maybe. But I have a feeling we should know it anyway."

"It's wild cucumber silly," said a light voice from just behind Renko.

The two girls turned to see a short girl with green hair and two gossamer wings flying in the air. The fairy smiled at the two, then blew past them in the blink of an eye. Renko gasped and tried to catch her dress as the blowback lifted her skirt. Maribel was in a similar predicament.

Huian of course, who was wearing pants, simply watched the fairy leave with a slight smile. "How did you like your first true fairy meeting?"

Renko laughed. "She was interesting."

Huian shrugged. "Yes. That girl is fairly harmless. Don't think all fairies are though. And definitely remember that could have been a youkai. It's good you're having fun, but don't get overconfident. I'd hate to hear you got eaten."

That brought the girls back down off their high. They continued down the trail in silence.

After a few moments Huian looked back again. "Sorry for killing the mood there. I just thought it was a good idea for you to know the ropes. Today I'm here, so for now take it easy and enjoy the trip. You won't get to enjoy wandering the woods like this anytime soon again." Huian pointed at a vine. "Oh right, that there is kudzu. You misidentified it last time."

"I thought Gensoukyo had mostly rare and extinct plants," Renko said.

"Well they have to have some of the common plants, otherwise there would be nothing to eat," said Mary.

Huian nodded. "Yep. You'll see some more familiar types when we reach the farm lands. Which should be pretty soon…"

Sure enough after one or two more bends in the path the woods cleared up a lot and the three girls looked down upon the human village. It looked mostly like an archaic village, but there were a few buildings that looked like they'd escaped from France or Holland. The grounds around the village were mostly farms, many flooded for rice cultivation. After a few more moments the two outsiders realized the village was much bigger then they'd first thought. It contained

several large houses, and it looked like there was at least two markets.

"Hm… How do they feed all the people? It doesn't look like there's enough farms here for this big a village," Renko asked. "Maybe if this were a modern farm, but with normal tools…"

"Well some of the houses are empty, but we mostly make do with magic to boost harvest yields," said a laconic voice. Renko looked over to see a woman in a workers shirt with long white hair stand from behind a rock.

Renko was about to greet the newcomer when Maribel suddenly jumped backward in fright. "You!"

The next second was a garbled mess. Renko was turning to her friend, when suddenly their guide appeared next to the woman and ran her through with a sword she produced from nowhere. Instead of screaming or anything however the woman merely looked bored. Then Renko was holding Mary's shoulder and they were both staring at the blood.

And then their guide and the woman started talking casually, as if nothing had happened.

"And now the kids are scared. I told you this would happen. Why do you have to stab me every time we meet out here?"

"It's the only way I can be sure it's actually you Mokou. I'm not handing over my charges just to anyone who can throw up an illusion of you. It would anger my mistress and shame me as a guard."

"Fine fine, but could you at least stab me in the head? That way there's less blood on my shirt."

Renko decided she and Mary needed to sit. Mary didn't resist.

"Oh right. Sorry. I'll send money for a new one…"

"Nah, it's cool. I'll just use this one for my next princess meeting."

The white haired girl looked them over again and shook her head. "Anyway, don't worry about me. The name's Fujiwara no Mokou. I'm sorta one of the village guards."

"You got stabbed," Renko pointed out mildly.

"Yeah, I can't die. It comes in handy sometimes." Mokou frowned and looked closer at Mary who was still trembling. "Wait, have I seen you before?"

Renko looked at her friend. "Are you okay Mary?"

Mary took a few deep breaths. "The bamboo forest…"

Huian flicked the blood off her sword. "Oh yes. That young lady apparently was here in dreams before."

"Aha!" Mokou looked pleased. "So that was you all those years ago. I was a little worried you'd gotten eaten. I'm glad you made it out."

Mary took a few more deep breaths to calm herself while staring at the ground. "Um… I'm sorry for treating you like a monster. It's just you were terribly frightening at the time."

"And your reaction here is kinda scary too," Renko muttered, looking at the blood.

Mokou shrugged. "Sorry. I was never really good with people." She made an attempt at cleaning off some of the blood but only managed to smear it around some more. "Er… Anyway I can take you the rest of the way down to the village. Keine's still in class, but recess should be soon. I'll take you there."

"You aren't really going to walk in on a classroom full of children in that shirt, are you?" Renko asked in disbelief.

Mokou considered it for a moment before sighing. "Eh, true. I guess I'll stick to guarding then." She waved before heading back to her sitting place. "If you could, tell Keine I'll be back for supper. I imagine I'll see you then."

Renko stood and dusted herself off before giving her escort a sheepish grin. "Um sorry about that."

Huian shook her head. "It's alright. Mokou can be disturbing at times, and my trick to figure out if she was in fact Mokou would be shocking to most people. I'm more surprised at your friend's reaction."

Renko frowned and looked over at Mary who still looked a little shaken. Feeling the gaze of both people on her she blinked, then stood up. "I'm sorry. It's my eyes. I… can tell her life is limitless. Without boundaries. It's… frightening."

"Hm…" Huian considered the matter. "While I hate to be so callous, I suggest you get used to it. There are many things in Gensoukyo that defy limitations and boundaries. Mokou is one of the safer ones, for humans anyway."

Huian started along the path again. "Anyways, we should get to the village. Recess can't last forever. No matter how much the kids may want it to."

The trip through the village was fairly uneventful. Mary took the time to recover from her encounter with the immortal.

She was now certain her eyes had gotten stronger. Before, when she looked at Mokou, she'd seen something wrong with the girl. But now her eyes had seen the vastness of the border between life and death. It was… harrowing.

She'd have to learn how to turn her vision off.

"You feeling any better Mary?" Renko asked, from her side.

Mary manged to put on a smile for her friend. "Yeah. Sorry, I'm a little better."

"Good, because we're here." Huian said.

The school building seemed small for a village this size, but it was still fairly respectable. In the yard around the school there were several children playing, most between the ages of 8 and 12 Maribel guessed. The last of her discomfort vanished as she watched the children laughing at play. This was one of the reasons she'd tried to get to Gensoukyo.

Huian bowed to the two outsiders. "I'm afraid this is where our paths split. It would be impolite for me as a youkai to wander onto school grounds these days. But Keine should be able to help you as much or better then I could.

Maribel and Renko returned the bow. "Thank you for guiding us," Mary said. "Will we see you again?"

Huian smiled. "Likely. Juri and I are the ones who do the mansion's shopping. Which is what I should attend to now. Good day Maribel, Renko, and may fortune favor you."

With that the youkai gate guard turned around and wandered off down the streets. Renko adjusted her hat then looked back towards the school building. "Well, shall we enter?"

Mary nodded then walked straight up to the school doors. The kids all looked at them strangely, but none of them broke away from their games to question the two girls. Mary was about to knock on the doors when a voice inside called out, "Come in." With a shrug Renko opened the door.

Inside the schoolroom was a set of desks, pillows and a chalkboard. Each desk had a couple of books and a small calligraphy set. At the back of the school stood a door, indicating there was probably more to the building. And of course at the front desk, sat the teacher

herself, an elegant lady probably in her thirties wearing a dress and a very, very elaborate hat. Maribel wasn't sure whether she should be impressed or laugh.

The woman stood and motioned that they should come up and take a seat. "Greetings. My name is Keine Kamishirasawa, and I offer you the hospitality of Gensoukyo village." She smiled. "Please feel free to sit down, and tell me your story."

As Mary approached her vision seemed to waver again. The woman before her seemed to be on the border of something. It wasn't scary like that Mokou girl had been, because Keine was still on one side of the boundary, but it was still disconcerting.

The teacher caught her gaze. "Interesting. I see Alice's note was accurate. In case you were wondering, your eyes are seeing my dual nature as a Were Hakutaku."

"Were Hakutaku?" Renko asked incredulously.

"I'll be certain to explain in more detail later." Keine replied. "First, your story please. The note I got from the Scarlet Devil Mansion was short on details."

So once again Maribel and Renko told their story. This time both of them were well enough to fill in the details the other missed. Keine was a quiet listener as well, only asking occasional questions. After they finished she nodded her head.

"I'm afraid that the magicians of the mansion were correct. There's no way I know of to exit Gensoukyo currently. However all humans are welcome in this village. Please, feel free to stay with me for the next month. I'm sorry there's not normal guest housing, but with the border locking up there's not really been a need for it." Keine shrugged. "Hopefully by then you'll both have found some place to work."

Maribel frowned. "Is there really a place for people like us? I don't know if this village really needs a expert on ghost legends."

"Or a theoretical physicist," Renko added dryly.

Keine smiled. "You might be surprised. Still, I imagine you'll both be called on more for your abilities. Boundary manipulation is a field that commands a great deal of respect Maribel. And astronomy is always in favor in the village Renko. I doubt you'll need to resort to farm work. Unless you enjoy it of course."

"Hm… An astronomer…" Renko thought about the matter. "I did take courses. And it would allow me to put my math skills to work…"

"I think it's something to look into Renko," Maribel stated. She then frowned. "I'm not sure about this boundary manipulation thing though. Everyone keeps talking about it being an incredible power, but I can't control it at all. The only thing that seems to have happened is my eyes have gotten better at seeing borders, which is apparently dangerous. Will I really be able to learn how to control borders in a months time?"

Keine shrugged. "I can't say. I do know that many of the seals and charms the Hakurei clan provides manage to grant similar powers to the uninitiated, so you should be able to use them better then most. And the creation of wards and seals is something that's required these days."

The teacher stood. "I'd love to speak on the matter more, but recess really should be over. I have to cover a lot more today before I can send the children home. Feel free to sit in on the class, or read through the history scrolls I have in the back rooms. After class is done I'll show you around the village." She smiled. "Form what you said about your knowledge of math though, I'd suggest the history scrolls. I very much doubt watching me teach the kids their times tables will be interesting."

Renko stood then helped Maribel to her feet. "Thanks for taking us in. For all the grim talk everyone in Gensoukyo's been really nice to us."

"I hope that continues to be the case," Keine said.

As Keine went to the front doors to call in her students Maribel followed Renko to the back door. The room hidden there looked like a small library. Scrolls packed the place from top to bottom.

"Well at least we won't get bored," Renko commented, fishing around for a scroll. "And Keine seemed like pleasant company. Way better then anyone at the dorms at college."

Maribel reached for another scroll. "My dorm was perfectly fine. I'm afraid you just got unlucky Renko."

"It's not my fault the university sorted people by musical taste instead of reasonable factors," Renko muttered.

Maribel laughed. It was nice to hear such familiar complaining.

A few scrolls later the frowns had returned however. "I hope Keine doesn't teach class like she writes," Renko said, "because this is terribly dry."

Maribel nodded. "I think these summaries over here are better, but it's still dull unless you know what you're looking for. This one here is on the Suwa war, so it's sort of interesting to look at the actual history."

"Hm… Maybe I'll browse that shelf then," Renko mused.

A few minutes later Maribel had finished the history she cared about and started browsing for another one.

"Hey Mary, look at this!" Renko said behind her.

Maribel moved over and read the line she was pointing to. "'Yukari Yakumo passes away. My powers are unable to read how she died, though officially it was due to age. Her Shikigami, Ran Yakumo takes over the line.'" She reached for the scroll. "May I?"

Renko handed it over to her friend then looked over her shoulder as the history continued.

VI: It has become apparent that the border has solidified. Youkai hunting parties have been unable to exit Gensoukyo, and there have been no reports of newcomers for a month. In addition ghost sightings are down.

VII: Hong Meiling passed away, also due to age. Thus passes the last of the original students of the Dim Mak school of martial arts. Her daughter Huian has taken her place as gatekeeper of the Scarlet Devil Mansion and is the last living master of the style.

VIII: Several youkai have attempted to find Mayohiga to get an explanation from Ran Yakumo. However the village that houses the Yakumo family remains lost. Supplies of human are running low apparently.

Maribel shuddered at the thought of warehouses full of corpses. "I hope they just stole dead bodies before…"

Renko nodded in agreement.

IX: Ran Yakumo appeared to state that she cannot keep the Hakurei border fluctuating. It has to be on or off. There will be no gathering from outside the border. We must do with what we have. I foresee much conflict in the future over this. Even friendly races such as the kappa enjoy human flesh too much to react well to the news.

X: Some of the more violent youkai attacked the Hakurei shrine today in an attempt to break the barrier. Most were killed by the Hakurei maiden or Ran Yakumo, who appeared to assist. However some fled, and the youkai in the area did nothing to stop them. With

this the era of spellcards has ended. It seems lethal dueling will once again be the primary means of solving disputes.

XI: It seems Sakuya believed it was unseemly for a human to outlive a youkai, and thus she challenged one of the few warriors capable of matching her in battle. With her successor chosen, Youmu agreed to the match. Both perished in the duel. At that time the Netherworld's border sealed. Their history is no longer available to me.

"I guess that's what happened to the maid you met before," Renko stated solemnly.

With the death of two of her servants, Remilia Scarlet entered vampiric hibernation, or topor. With her gone the fairy maids have mostly scattered and returned to natural living. Most youkai believe that is the end of the Scarlet Devil Mansion as a power in Gensoukyo, though with the number of witches in the building that seems foolhardy at best.

XII: There was an assault on the human village. I tried to stop it, but several of the outlying farms were taken. The only thing preventing worse disaster was the arrival of the shrine maidens, and a detachment from the temple. With their aid the youkai were scattered with heavy losses.

Sadly, Byakuren, head nun of the temple, took the loss of life on both sides poorly, possibly because she was forced to seal another youkai. She's taken up reciting the sutras full time. In her absence Toramaru Shou has pledged to guard the village in Bishamonten's name so long as we permit innocent youkai to still enter freely. It's too good an offer to pass on. There was a lot of grumbling, but in the end the village agreed.

Fujiwara no Mokou has also moved into the village for its defense. She has decided to stay with me for the time.

XIII: The great houses have finally all closed their doors. The tengu and kappa, always territorial, have sealed the mountain off, despite

the protests from the mountain gods. Eientei has also disappeared into the bamboo forest, with only the occasional medicine seller appearing. Heaven has taken to patrolling, so no mortal can find safe haven there. The only place still open is the underground, where few youkai wish to live, and few humans can survive long.

Some however had no choice. After the attack on the village, the lesser youkai have turned upon each other. Some knew eradicating the humans could't be allowed. Others are settling old grudges. In either case several youkai species have been driven back below the earth.

Some species however were not so lucky. Vampires, forced by nature to feed on humans, can not flee to the far reaches of the land. For the first time I pity those creatures. Groups of youkai have been scouring the lands to exterminate the entire vampire race.

XIV: The vampire genocide has ended, with a high cost of life on both sides. The roving mobs of youkai succeeded in hunting down almost all the vampires, though I know at least one ("Kurumi") fled to the realm of dreams. In addition, vampires are not easy to kill, and several bands were exterminated as well.

Finally someone remembered that the Scarlet Devil Mansion had been home to not one, but two vampires. An massive expedition was gathered and carried out.

The groups met no resistance in at the gate, or even inside the mansion. It was when they broke into the basement that the witches acted, casting a spell of confusion over the entire house. The basement turned into a maze, where you could lose sight of your friends forever just by turning a corner.

For the rest of the month the mansion echoed with screams.

Maribel thought back to the crimson halls and shuddered. She moved to close the scroll but Renko stopped her.

"You're going to have to finish it," Renko said.

Maribel frowned at her friend. "No I don't. Especially not right now when I'm already primed for nightmares. I can read it all later."

Renko just gave her a look, "If you don't read it now you'll be staying up late wondering what happens."

"Traitor. Using logic against me."

Maribel sighed and continued reading.

Three weeks later the remaining youkai were impaled in front of the building as a message. Those that survived the process and freed themselves delivered it well. Flandre Scarlet was the head of the Mansion, and the magician Juri was it's new head maid. Those who challenged her rule would be either made into examples or used as research by the magicians.

XV: Once again Gensoukyo is balanced, though it is a harsher balance then before. The friendly connections between the great houses have been cut by fear and suspicion. Each has the power to destroy the land, but none can stand against any two of the others. The village is safe, but it is the safety of a wildlife reserve. And with there being no real room for incidents, I fear the power of youkai will begin to fade.

I fear, if nothing changes, Gensoukyo will slowly die.

Authors notes: And here we have the big exposition. Keine, you make my life so much easier. I did a few edits for brevity here and there, but nothing really changed.

Now we've moved past the setting and into the body. Mary and Renko are going to start getting a little more active now that they've got a place to stay and work out of.

Thanks again to all my reviewers (Especially since I'm posting twice a week. Much faster then I normally do.) and don't worry about making speculation. I get good ideas off of that, and it always helps tell me where I need a little more detail (or at least a note).

Chapter 6

Renko inspected the apple carefully. While she had always been interested in natural foods, she had to admit that it was kind of nice to not have to check all your produce for worms. "I really wish we'd thought to bring our exploring club supplies. My knife would be real handy."

She immediately regretted the comment when Maribel looked downcast. "Eh, we'll just have to get some new stuff. It's not like we ever packed for more then a couple of days anyways."

Maribel sighed. "That's true." Her friend's eyes returned to the barrel before picking out three more of the red fruits. "Hm… These should be good by tomorrow."

Renko nodded, then added the apple she was inspecting to the basket. She then turned to the vendor. "We'll take these."

The stall owner smiled. "That'll be ten copper coins miss."

Renko was confused for a bit. They'd only gotten eight apples, and they were small at that. "I think you miscounted. Here take a look."

The man gave her an odd look in return. "Um…"

The three stood in silence for a moment before Renko realized she was probably supposed to haggle. "Ah! Six coins is fair for this many, right?"

The man pretended to look incredulous. "Six? In this season? No less then nine."

Mary tapped Renko on the shoulder. "They look pretty small to cost that much. Far smaller then the apples outside. Maybe seven, Renko?"

Renko groaned internally but tried to keep her worry off her face. "Yeah, seven sounds right."

"I don't know what the apples 'outside' look like, but these are some of the finest in Gensoukyo," the man stated with a grin. "Nine is a fair price here."

Renko fished around in her pocket, then looked at the cash in her hand. "That's too bad. We only have eight copper. I'm afraid we'll have to call Keine over then."

The man blanched. "Er… Well I can make a special deal for you today. Eight for eight."

Renko smiled and handed over the money. "Thank you, sir."

"Thank you." Mary repeated.

As the two walked off Renko softly said, "Mary, I think that mentioning we're outsiders is a bad plan. That usually means 'fleece me' when haggling is involved."

Mary looked embarrassed. "Yeah I realized that as soon as I said it. Sorry."

"You didn't do too badly." Keine said as she stepped out of the crowd. "I know haggling has gone out of style in the outside world. I'm surprised you realized what you needed to do so quickly."

Renko smiled at the praise as she returned the rest of the coins Keine had given her. "Well we're both students of history to some degree, and you still need to haggle some places."

Mary nodded. "If nothing else it appears in books frequently."

Keine handed off one of her own shopping baskets to Mary and began heading back towards the school house. "That's good. You'll need that skill around here. Later on I'll give you an idea about how

much things are worth in Gensoukyo, but for now you can get a general feel for things by watching the market in your off time."

As they moved out of the market and started passing more permanent stores, Renko noticed something odd. "Hey Keine, why are there so many hatters? That's the fourth one we've passed."

Keine shrugged. "I actually have no idea. I've never really thought about it. Hats have always been popular in Gensoukyo."

Renko brooded on that for a while. It didn't seem to fit the era. Oh well, at least she'd be able to replace her hat when it finally wore out.

She wondered if one of those stores was where Keine got her… headpiece. And if that meant the place was really good, or someplace to avoid.

After a bit of walking Keine paused for a moment. "Would you mind if we took a slight detour? I want to check up on someone."

The two girls looked at each other and shrugged. "Sure. We're here to see the village after all," Mary said.

"Thank you," Keine replied. She turned and headed down a few alleys towards where Renko thought the other market was probably located.

After a bit more walking Renko began to hear someone singing. It was an odd song, seemingly changing pitches at random while still remaining lyrical. As if someone was trying to sing bird song.

As the trio entered a larger street the source of the singing became apparent. Behind the counter of a food stand a girl, who could only be considered a bird youkai, was happily singing as she grilled fish. Mostly lamprey from the menu. She looked surprised to see Keine, but she didn't stop singing until the school teacher approached the counter. "What do you want, Keine?"

The words weren't openly hostile, but they weren't friendly either. Keine however seemed unfazed. "I just wanted to check if there were any rumors running around the forest. You're usually one of the first to hear things, Mystia, even if you don't roam as much as you used to."

Mystia considered the matter as she flipped a few pieces of lamprey. "Hm… I haven't really heard anything. The only oddity is Rumia's disappeared, but she does that every now and then. Chen's off working too, but that's hardly news."

Keine thought for a moment. "Still a week and a half to the full moon as well." She sighed. "Well thank you Mystia. I'll probably be dropping by until then just in case something changes."

Mystia shrugged. "I'll keep my ears open when I go fishing next time." She turned back to her grill and started singing again.

Keine returned and began leading them once again to the schoolhouse. "Sorry about that. I wanted to check to see if your arrival had caused any changes with the local youkai. I don't expect anything like that of course, but it's better to be safe then sorry."

"Is she one of the 'friendly youkai' that your history text mentioned?" Mary asked.

Keine looked startled then laughed. "Yes I guess you could say she is, though I wouldn't recommend saying it to her face. She was one of the youkai that still hunted humans actually for a long while, even if she wasn't too serious about it." Keine's grin faded a bit. "However, youkai don't just eat humans. For many species, weaker youkai are fine too. Mokou rescued her after her wing got broken, and she set up shop in the village. After a while she decided to stay. To tell the truth, she was never good at actually catching humans before, and she was making a lot of money here. Also no one tries to eat her in the village."

The two girls frowned. "Is she safe to be around?"

Keine nodded. "I think she's actually grown somewhat fond of most humans, though she'd never admit it. She's been here a few generations now. She's angry at me for… a variety of other reasons. We didn't get along well when we first met."

They walked for a bit more before Mary spoke up again. "And… well, is that safe for her? I mean we read your history on the changes to Gensoukyo and…"

Keine managed a weak smile. "Oh right." She sighed and shook her head. "You should forget about that. I very much doubt that day will come during your lifetimes. It takes awhile for a true dream to fade away."

"Anyways, Mystia is actually doing rather well. You see, most youkai's powers fade when they aren't feared or respected. I get my powers from respect, and because of my human nature. Mystia on the other hand has actually gotten more fear and respect now that she's a member of the village."

Renko blinked. "How so?"

Keine paused for a moment. "In the village, we have only one crime for serious offenses. Banishment. Since there's no one who will call vengeance on a youkai for eating a non person…" Mary and Renko blanched. "Anyway, Mystia has been using her advance knowledge of when the punishment is to take place to get a leg up on the competition. Some of the more superstitious villagers see her as an youkai of vengeance now. She's doing fine."

Renko felt slightly dizzy at the thought of the small bird girl hunting down people as they fled the village. "Are you *trying* to throw us off balance with culture shock!"

Keine nodded. "Yes. I've found it's better to cause a mental breakdown in the first couple of days when Mokou and I can help. Letting things build up usually ends up hurting more in the long run."

Renko and Mary looked at each other. It seemed they were in for a long week.

Keine's house at the back of the school was smaller then what Maribel had expected, but still spacious compared to the apartments of Japan. It had a combination entry room / kitchen, in addition to a decently sized bedroom and a bath. Beyond that was the massive records room of course, and Keine had told them there was an attic above Keine's room where they would be staying.

Currently though they were using the kitchen to prepare the groceries Keine had acquired. "That should do it." She ignored Renko's questioning glance. The other girl was great at measuring ingredients, but she was always terrible when it came to timing. Renko always knew when it was, but never could judge when things needed to be done.

Keine walked over from where she'd been preparing the vegetables and took a sample of the curry. "Excellent! Thanks for helping with the cooking."

Maribel smiled. "Well we should try to help somehow, since we're staying over."

"Though curry's a pretty easy recipe," Renko added. "We might need a little more help with something harder."

The door opened.

Immediately Maribel had to look away. Once again infinity ripped into her mind from her eyes. She took a few deep breaths to try to clear her head while she stared at the walls. Those were much less terrifying. As her mind cleared she noticed Renko was holding her hand.

"Er, I'm not that hungry today Keine, so I'll just wander around for a bit before nightfall," Mokou said behind her.

There was a couple of quick steps, followed by a sharp crack and a yelp of pain. "Fujiwara no Mokou! You will NOT just wander into the woods because you're feeling guilty about that young girl's power! If you're worried about it you can sit outside while you eat."

Maribel turned towards the fight until she caught a glimpse of the immortal for the corner of her eyes. It was annoying, but not actively painful like this. "Um… I can handle it, so long as I'm not staring directly at you." She immediately felt terrible about it. "I'm sorry, I'm being a bad guest."

"Not your fault," Mokou replied. "I'm surprised your power's kicked up so much though. You really should have that investigated."

Keine's voice chimed in. "The next school free day I'll take you to the temple of Myouren. They should be able to help you."

Renko stepped in front of Maribel, to her annoyance and relief. "What about the Hakurei Shrine you were talking about? Wouldn't they be good with boundaries?"

Keine shook her head. "They would be better people to ask, but I'm afraid the forest between the village and there is incredibly perilous. The Hakurei miko acts to eliminate the most dangerous youkai who choose to attack humans. So the youkai do their best to make going to the shrine as dangerous as possible. I'm unsure if I could protect you two by myself, and going with Mokou is out as well."

"However the temple has some people who could take you there safely even if they can't help you themselves." The schoolteacher sat down at the table. "For now I'll see if concealing Mokou's history will help. But, I'd like you to try to handle it on your own later. You might learn some more about your abilities if you do so."

Renko hesitated for a moment, but she moved when Maribel pushed her towards the other chair. This time Maribel couldn't see anything from the white haired woman. She sighed in relief then bowed in apology. "I'm really very sorry for being such a pain."

Mokou shook her head. "Don't worry about it. It's my fault for drinking that stupid elixir. Though, if you slapped Eirin for making the stupid stuff to begin with I'd have a good laugh."

The rest of dinner was awkward to put it mildly. Maribel felt terrible for treating Mokou like some kind of freak. Mokou seemed to feel that she was some kind of freak. Keine was insistent that Mokou act like everyone else, and Renko was feeling incredibly helpless and out of place.

Finally Mokou finished her meal and stood. "I'll go heat up the baths." The immortal was out the doors before anyone could voice a protest.

Maribel opened her mouth to apologize again, but Keine just shook her head. "Don't let it bother you too much. Mokou's always been bad at socializing with other humans. It's not your fault. You're trying your best."

Maribel lowered her eyes. "I still feel bad about it. And I don't want to constantly have splitting headaches when I run across people like that either."

Renko frowned. "Yeah. That could get annoying really fast. When is your next free day Keine?"

Keine thought for a moment. "Three days from now. That should give you plenty of time to look around the village and start figuring out what you want to do with yourselves. I'll still help show you around after classes of course."

"Now you two go ahead and take a bath," the school teacher said while standing. "I'll take the time to get some spare clothes for you two as well. You two both know how to put on a basic kimono right?"

Maribel and Renko both nodded. "Yeah."

Keine smiled. "Good. You'll eventually both need to learn how to make them, but that will do for now. Oh, I'll also look up some spells for you two to try out, but we should wait until tomorrow for that. You'll both want a good night's rest before trying magic. Even if it is in an easy to use form."

Maribel's breath caught. "You're going to teach us magic? Real magic?" Renko asked beside her.

Keine's smile grew wider. "I'll teach you the basics. Everyone knows a little magic in Gensoukyo. The rest you'll have to learn on your own, but if you truly want it, you should be able to learn quite a bit."

Clean and wearing a fresh, if slightly worn, yukata Maribel found herself staring at the attic's ceiling. The room was filled with odd trinkets, mirrors and other items that Maribel would normally happily investigate, but she was bone tired, in spirit if not in body. She wasn't sure she wanted to learn anything else today.

The thoughts of magic had been on her mind all through her preparations for bed. But now, as Maribel laid there, she began to wonder what price that magic might have. She'd wanted to travel across the boundaries her eyes had seen for so long, but now that she'd succeeded she was lost in a strange world. Would learning magic set her even more adrift?

Or would it be the solution to all her problems?

She turned on the futon and looked over at Renko. Her friend was staring out the attic window at the stars. For once she truly envied her friends strange eyes. Renko's eyes didn't tear apart worlds or force her to see things. They just told Renko where she was, something Maribel wasn't sure about anymore.

Renko must have felt her gaze, because her friend turned from the window and shut the curtains. "It's 11 o'clock. We probably should try to get some rest."

Maribel nodded and pulled the blankets over her as Renko snuffed the oil lantern. As her friend slipped into the other futon Maribel reached out and put her hand on Renko's arm.

Renko started at the touch, then she wordlessly took Maribel's hand. With that Maribel allowed herself to sleep. She knew that no matter where they ended up, Renko would be there to tell her where they were.

There are cherry trees everywhere.

I'm not sure if that's a terrible insult, or somehow fitting.

But then, you probably don't remember.

I see you now. Standing in front of the one tree that doesn't blossom. The tree that will never blossom, thanks to you

You look different then you did in life. Your hair has turned the same color as the blossoms, but that's not the real change. Your face seems happier, but less passionate. Less, well… alive.

How else have you changed my friend? How much of your humanity do you still have? Do you remember the trials you suffered through, the decisions you made and that made you?

Do you remember me?

You turn at my approach…

I don't see any recognition on your face.

It doesn't matter. Even if you've changed completely, even if you no longer wish to be my friend, I still remember you. And I want you to know that.

I walk up and hug your ghostly form. And as you gasp in surprise I whisper, "I missed you."

Author's Notes: I apologize for not figuring out the name of the copper coins used in 1800's Japan. I learned they had actually started making their own coins instead of just using ones from China, but I didn't learn the name… Anyway, I assume some bill usage has leaked in, with the lack of mines to make gold and silver coins, but that doesn't seem the right denomination for buying apples.

I also apologize for it being a little shorter then last time, but this is the best break point. The next chapter will introduce a few more old faces and new revelations, some obvious from the foreshadowing, others less so.

Lastly, in response to the reviews, I'd actually love to explain my views of the SDM and it's inhabitants, especially Sakuya, but it'd take a full fic of it's own to do right. Perhaps some day.

Chapter 7

They'd finally reached the portion of the day that shed'd been thinking about since last night. They were in a strange land, separated forever from home, surrounded by beings that thought they'd go well with a bit of soy sauce. But that seemed completely unimportant, because today, they were going to learn magic.

Or at least, that's what Keine claimed they were doing.

Renko stared down at the card then glanced over to Maribel. She shook her head as well. "So these cards will allow us to cast magic?"

Keine hesitated for a moment before nodding. "Yes, but probably not today. Right now they'll give me a rough estimate of how strong you are, and allow you to get an idea of what magic feels like." She gestured towards some nearby scrolls. "After that you'll begin the real process."

"But how do cards help?" Maribel asked.

"Those items are magical artifacts known as spellcards. Spellcards are part of an ancient dueling mechanism that has gone in and out of favor across the centuries. Originally designed by a small magician sect shortly after the first Lunarians departed, it spread to the tengu and from there to youkai across the lands. Its purpose is to allow for non lethal duels while still showing the spirit of the participants, and the capture system showed your victories over time, however…" Keine blinked then stopped her historical lecture. "Um, in any case the nice thing about spellcards is that they're designed to be activated quickly and safely, and they're linked to the user's preferred style of magic."

Maribel gave the cards another close look. "But you said we can't use them to create magic."

"Probably not." Keine looked slightly embarrassed. "I don't really have much skill at teaching magic. I'm mostly going by guesswork. But I know this is a safe way of determining your power."

Renko pulled out a card from her stack. "So how do we use these things?"

Keine pulled out a card of her own. "Simple. Focus on the card and call out it's name. If you have an idea about what it should look like visualize that." She closed her eyes then held her card towards the sky. "Sacred Treasure: Magetama!"

Maribel jumped back in surprise as several energy bubbles flew into the sky, followed by a dazzling stream of glowing shots. The spell moved somewhat slowly, but the pattern looked almost like a curving wall. It was as beautiful as any fireworks display back home. Perhaps more so.

"Whoa," said Renko from beside her.

Keine lowered her hands and the spell abruptly stopped, the bullets vanishing. "Now you two give it a try."

Maribel began looking through the cards Keine had given her. 'Flying insects' nest'? What, did the spell summon bees? 'Mesh of Light and Darkness.' How would that look? 'Border of Wave and Particle…' That sounded promising. "Renko, light is a wave and a particle, right?"

Renko gave her a questioning look. "Yeah, basically. Why do you ask?"

"One of the cards referenced that for some reason."

"That's strange. Then again I guess a physicist had to have wandered in her at some point, considering the questions the mages were giving me back at the mansion." Renko returned her attention

to the cards. "I'll give these a shot." Renko said, holding up 3 cards from her stack.

Maribel nodded and held up the spellcard that had caught her eye. "I'll try this one."

Renko stepped up first and held up a card. "Curse of the Heavens: Apollo 13!"

There was a long pause as nothing happened.

Finally Renko put her arm down. "It felt like something was different but…" Maribel stifled a giggle as Renko blushed. Her friend didn't need to be told how silly she looked.

Keine just smiled. "Don't worry. Eirin's spells are all very difficult, and that one's probably even worse for you because you don't know the real history. Try the other two."

Maribel briefly wondered about the 'real history' bit, but Renko pulled out her second card. "Star Sign: Twinkle Sapphire!"

This time the card glowed bright purple. Then the light surrounded Renko, occasionally flaring out. There were no bullets but Maribel could see tiny stars in the light.

After a few more seconds the glow cut out, just as abruptly as Keine's spell had. The school teacher began clapping, and Mary joined in soon after. "That was great Renko!" Renko flushed and adjusted her hat.

Keine nodded. "Indeed. Even if that was a fairy's spell, it's still an impressive feat for someone without training. I think I know where to start you. Try the third spell."

Renko nodded. "Okay. Let's see… Star Sign: Eccentric Asteroid!"

This time there was just a yellow glow from the card. Maribel could sense some sparkles around it, but she couldn't tell if those were

real, or something only her eyes could see.

Renko lowered the card and frowned. "That didn't work as well."

Keine smiled. "No actually, given the difference in power between you and the creator of that card I think it went very well. In fact I already know where to start you." Keine searched through the scrolls before handing Renko a few. "You seem to favor star style magics. These are the works that Marisa Kirisame used to train. You should get good use out of them for now."

Renko nodded as she took the scrolls. "Maybe I should reconsider that deal with the mansion too, if you think that Marisa's a good teacher."

Keine laughed. "No no no. Marisa would be a terrible teacher. She's a good magician, but she's terrible at explaining things in a sane manner. The only one of the magician kids that managed to learn her spells did it by recreating them from scratch. And Yukihana moved to Makai, so she can't really help. But since both of them managed to learn magic on their own you should be able to do so as well."

Renko nodded. "Okay, that makes sense. I guess I'll just have to study hard then."

Now Maribel found both sets of eye on her. She took a deep breath and tried to not feel nervous. The card would probably just glow a bit then Keine would hand her some reading. Not much to worry about. She held the slip up and called out, "Border of Wave and Particle!"

Maribel felt a rush, like she was running downhill. Her eyes twisted and suddenly she could SEE the light, millions of little particles, swirling like waves. It was amazing. She saw the card become a light on it's own, swirling waves of particles heading into the sky.

"MARY STOP!"

Maribel blinked and her vision cleared. Renko was on the ground behind a tree stump, and Keine was picking herself off the ground and patting at a hole in her dress. Maribel blanched and dropped the card. "Wha… what happened?"

Keine winced as she tested her shoulder. "You succeeded in using the spellcard. It was less powerful then Yukari's normal attack, but still packed a decent punch. However, I thought that was impossible even with your boundary manipulation abilities." She looked over at Renko. "Nice dodging by the way. That's a good skill to have."

Renko stood up and dusted herself off. "Well, I guess Mary beats me. Guess you really are connected to this Yakumo person."

"Obviously yes, but that doesn't explain it…" Keine stood there for a long moment frowning. Maribel began to feel uneasy.

"I'm afraid I was lying to you earlier. Spellcards are actually nothing more then a piece of paper that makes spells cast through them less lethal. I added a spell that would show your potential based on your own magical efforts," Keine looked at Renko. "The effects you caused were because of my spell. Maribel here seems to have bypassed that entirely."

Keine sighed. "I really shouldn't be surprised by this. You did manage to travel to the moon after all. However being able to duplicate her spellcard personally… that really shouldn't be possible outside of a few circumstances. With that I believe I can say with near certainty you are her reincarnation."

Maribel felt slightly ill as Keine continued to look at her with cautious eyes. The young woman couldn't help but look down at the ground to avoid that piercing gaze. She'd believe in reincarnation on an abstract level, but it now seemed to be driving her life. And having someone know the person you were reincarnated from personally was very odd.

A familiar arm draped across her shoulders. Maribel smiled and shook off the odd feeling. "Thanks Renko, but I'm fine. I'm getting used to these shocks." She frowned. "Besides you're cold."

"M~M~M~Mary!"

Maribel turned towards the voice to see Renko still standing next to the tree stump, pointing at her while trembling.

Maribel's veins turned to ice. She didn't want to turn. She didn't want to look. But she had to. Slowly she managed to force herself to turn her head.

The woman was beautiful. Her hair seemed to be the color of cherry blossoms, and her skin was fair and pale. Her funeral robes were blue and pure white and she was only slightly translucent.

As Maribel took all that in, the ghost smiled and enfolded Mary in her ice cold arms. As Mary gasped the ghost whispered in her ear, "I missed you."

Maribel decided now would be an appropriate point to scream.

Mystia sang to herself as she cleaned her grill. She sang most of the time really. Singing was her nature, and no matter what minor changes she'd gone through, that was still part of Mystia's being.

Some the other youkai thought that Mystia had become tamed, but really she considered the village just a really safe nesting spot. It had the potential to cage her of course, but it was no more dangerous then the forest. And a cage with an open door wasn't a cage at all.

Still, she did wish she could use her blinding song more often.

Mystia paused in her cleaning as a figure stepped out of the alleyway. "I'm sorry, we're not ready for business yet."

The figure chuckled. "I'm not looking for lunch, at least, not my lunch."

Mystia's eyes narrowed and she moved to place her grill between her and the intruder. "What do you want Ran?"

The kitsune slowly moved into the light, then stopped politely. "Don't worry. I'm here to offer you a job. You're one of the few youkai I know I can trust."

Mystia bent her legs in case she needed to jump away quickly. "And if I refuse?"

"Then I'd request that you keep the matter a secret. I can't force you to do it, but it would be problematic if the rumor market got too active." Ran smiled slightly, her teeth gleaming.

Mystia relaxed a bit. The casual threat indicated the fox youkai was probably telling the truth, and Mystia knew how to keep her mouth shut when needed. "What's the job?"

"I need someone to help collect and distribute human corpses…"

The explanation was surprisingly short, which really wasn't a good thing. After Ran finished telling her the plan, Mystia shook her head. "Not a chance."

Mystia shuddered a bit as Ran growled in frustration. She was pretty sure the kitsune wouldn't harm her, but as a prey species she couldn't be too trusting.

"Why not?" Ran asked. "I can understand the other two I talked to, but why not you Mystia? Have you really gotten domesticated? Or are you actually going after that immortal girl?"

Mystia looked shocked, then giggled. "Hardly. It's just your offer is terrible."

Ran's eyes narrowed. "What's wrong with all the human you can eat?"

"Because I'd get eaten first!" Mystia shook her head. "Some people might believe that I've got a safe source, but most would just figure I'm shrine maiden bait and take me and the meat as a bonus. Heck there are enough stupid youkai around that some wouldn't even think about it before attacking."

Ran growled in annoyance again. "So then 'Eel Cart Lady', what the hell am I supposed to do? I can't leave this in the hands of one of the big players. The only one that needs humans anyway is the damned Scarlet Devil Mansion, and no one likes them."

Mystia shrugged. "You're going to have to prove this isn't a short term thing. That you're in control now and the good old days of the youkai sage are back."

Ran thought about that for a moment. "You always were good at marketing little sparrow." Then she began to pace. "Hm… how to do this without screwing everything up again. This will take some calculations."

Mystia reached into her ice chest and pulled out a chilled lamprey. "Well, while you thinking could I interest you in some fish? I hear it's good brain food…"

Mary's scream managed to break the paralysis of fear that was holding Renko in place.

At least that's what she wanted to claim. The truth was that even hearing her friend cry out, it still took her some time to get her shivering legs in motion and reach her side.

Which is why by the time Renko was there to protect Mary, the ghostly figure had released her and was floating away looking disappointed. "Oh dear. You didn't take it as well as I did."

"Who are you!" Renko yelled at the ghost.

Then she felt Keine's hand fall on her shoulder. "It's alright. She's harmless. Usually."

"But why are you here Yuyuko? For that matter, how are you here?" Keine asked as she stepped up to the pale figure.

The ghost hid her face with her sleeve. "How cold. I simply came to talk to my old friend again. Even if she doesn't remember me."

Yuyuko sighed and let the sleeve drop before looking straight at Mary. "But I guess this is different isn't it. We both don't remember our past, but I was still me then. Now you, no she, is someone else."

Renko gave Mary a hand up, while keeping her eyes fixed on the ghost. Mary seemed less scared, but Renko could still feel her friends pulse racing. Or maybe that was her own heartbeat.

Keine however seemed to be completely relaxed. "So that confirms it." Keine turned towards them. "Since she's apparently able to enter Gensoukyo again, I might as well introduce you. This is Yuyuko Saigyouji, Princess of the Netherworld. Yuyuko, Maribel Hearn and Renko Usami, from the outside world."

Yuyuko smiled then bowed. "A pleasure to meet you two again."

Renko hesitated a moment before giving a slight bow, with Mary following shortly behind. They didn't let go of each others hands though. "So you've met me in a past life too?" Renko asked.

Yuyuko thought on the matter for a moment. "Sort of. It was after the Yama had judged you however, so your past life was mostly cleaned away. I can't say I knew you well."

Mary's grip on Renko's hand tightened, so she gave Mary a comforting squeeze in return. "So… how well did this Yukari know you before?" Mary asked.

Yuyuko's smile widened. "Better then I knew myself. Death and judgment tend to remove most of your memories you see, though it leaves the personality. Reincarnation however can change that. Or so it seems." Yuyuko bowed once again. "I'm sorry for surprising you. You see, you had known me when I was alive, so you greeted me when I assumed my care of the Netherworld. I thought I'd feel better returning the favor, but well, I'd forgotten that people here probably were afraid of ghosts since the boundaries had gone back up."

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'm a bit curious about that." Keine asked. "How did you get into Gensoukyo again? And should we be worried about more ghosts wandering about?"

Yuyuko nodded to Keine. "You will be seeing more ghosts because the boundary between Gensoukyo and the Netherworld has weakened. That's how I can travel here as well."

Suddenly Yuyuko smiled happily. "Well even if I got a few things wrong, I've done what I came to do. I probably should return and start teaching my new gardener the ins and outs of the world of the living. It was good speaking to you again, Maribel was it? And you as well Renko."

"Good to meet you too?" Renko replied.

"Um, it was good to meet you, but could you do me a favor?" Mary said. "Could you not keep treating this Yukari and me like the same person? I'm not her."

Yuyuko paused, her smile fading again. "Hm… While I can understand your confusion over the matter, the truth is you are her. One of the biggest mistakes I made came from forgetting who I had been."

"Well your situations aren't exactly the same are they?"

Renko felt her neck begin to prickle with embarrassment when she found everyone staring at her. She hadn't meant to say that out loud!

Yuyuko however didn't seem insulted, just concerned. "Perhaps."

"Yuyuko, there's something you aren't telling us isn't there," Keine stated.

The ghost pulled out a fan and fiddled with it for a bit before nodding again. "But Yukari specifically asked me to keep that a secret." The ghost looked pointedly at Maribel.

"Well then that's between you and her," Maribel replied.

Renko chuckled at her friends comment. Surprisingly so did Keine and Yuyuko. Still smiling Yuyuko nodded. "Very well. I never was one to listen to her plans unless they were fun."

She composed herself and for the first time looked at all three of the living women present. "Yukari Yakumo knew of her death. She might even have planned it. I don't know. I do know she came to say goodbye to me beforehand. And she asked me not to interfere with her plans after her death."

Renko felt fear stirring in her again as the ghost looked at Mary and her. "So even if you don't want to be associated with Yukari, her plans are in motion, and you probably are at the center of them."

Authors Notes: The second half has the first section that got some proofreading, and I think it shows. Everything after this got at least one look over, and I want to thank Roukan for his assistance there.

Chapter 8

" *I knew you would come here, murderer."*

" *Oh good, I'd hate to think I wasted the trip."*

" *You seem rather carefree for someone whose powers are being negated."*

" *Ufufu. Normally I'd pretend that I care, but you're such a fool you'll go ahead with your plans anyway, even if I tell you about the trap."*

"*… I think you're bluffing. Kill her."*

" *Strike me down, and I will become more powerful then you could possibly imagine."*

" *Do you really want your last words to be that?"*

" *What makes you think that these will be my last words? We will meet again…"*

"Time to wake up Mary."

Maribel muttered something unintelligible then forced herself to sit up. "Wha…" She looked around the small attic getting her bearings before turning to her friend. "Renko. You waking me up?"

Renko sighed. "I'm waking you up because we're going to the Myouren temple today. Remember?"

Maribel stretched then nodded. She figured she shouldn't mention she was actually asking if they were really so late Renko had to wake her.

Maribel pulled herself free from the futon then stood up and grabbed her dress. Renko and her had been wearing spare kimonos in town

to help blend in, but outside the village she didn't need to bother with that.

Renko sat and waited for her. "You look out of it Mary. I thought you wanted to go to the temple and get your eyes looked at. Did you have bad dreams?"

"I'm just not looking forward to hearing more about that Yukari." Maribel sighed. "But I suppose that's a stupid reason to dawdle."

"Yeah it is," Renko said. "I thought you'd gotten over that too. You didn't seem angry when we were chatting with Yuyuko again yesterday."

"Only because she actually was talking to me this time." Maribel finished dressing then adjusted her hat. "Also it's really hard to stay mad at her. She just doesn't seem to have any malice."

Renko nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah. Maybe being dead that long gives you a different view on things." Her friend laughed lightly. "But I don't think that'd be a good thing to experiment with."

Maribel smiled in return. "No it wouldn't."

The two girls made their way down to the first floor of Keine's schoolhouse home and were greeted by the smell of a traditional Japanese breakfast, the standard at Keine's home. It was good and filling, but a little monotonous. Maribel once again made a mental note to try to get up early and make pancakes one of these days.

"Good Morning!" Keine said with a smile as she waved the two towards the seats where meals were sitting. "Mokou got called out to help the foresters, but there shouldn't be any trouble getting to the temple so long as I'm there."

Maribel just nodded and started in on her food. Renko sat beside her.

"So who are we going to meet at this temple?" her friend asked. "I think I saw something about them in your histories but we haven't really run into them in the village."

Keine chuckled. "Actually I bet you've seen Nue about. She does most of their shopping these days, though I don't think I'd notice her since she'd be hiding her true form."

Maribel frowned. "Nue? Didn't the samurai Hiyori shoot the creature? And wasn't it a troublemaker?"

"Apparently she was merely sealed," Keine sighed. "And she still is a troublemaker, she just doesn't kill people anymore. One of the good deeds Byakuren accomplished. But perhaps I should tell the story from the beginning."

Keine explained how the temple of Myouren came to be. From the fall of the legendary Myouren's sister Byakuren, to the incident where Marisa (who had apparently been human at the time) and two miko freed her, and helped her build a temple where youkai and humans could learn to live together. While it was a truncated version Maribel found herself liking the characters Keine described.

Keine finished her explanation about the same time breakfast wrapped up. "Of course, when the border solidified and relations between humans and youkai became strained again, the Myouren temple tried to fix things. Sadly there's only so much goodwill alone can do. After the battle Byakuren retreated to her chambers to meditate. Some people think she's running from her past actions. I personally think she's investigating the barrier to find a way to set it back to it's old state. But either way Shou is in charge now."

"Hm…" Maribel considered the matter. "So we're not likely to get answers there then. Just a guard to help us get to the Hakurei shrine."

Keine shook her head as they started to clear the table. "I admit Byakuren's advice would be helpful, but Shou or Ichirin might have

an idea as well. The temple of Myoren is a Shingon sect temple, and Shou is an avatar of Bishamonten. All of them are proficient in spiritual abilities."

Maribel looked outside. The sun was shining mildly, and she heard the laughter of the kids in the front playing on the grounds in front of the school.

"Well, if nothing else it's a nice day for a walk."

When everything was put away the three headed out. Maribel nodded to some of the villagers she'd seen about, and they stopped to chat with Haraguchi-sensei, the woman who apparently as a private tutor for the few children who wanted to advance their studies beyond what Keine's school could offer. Maribel was still sometimes taken aback by how quickly Renko and her had been welcomed into the community, but apparently being vouched for by Keine counted for a lot. Or maybe the village just was quicker to band together.

Once outside the village Maribel and Renko again marveled at how natural everything was. Even the rice fields seemed a thousand times more lively then the world they left behind, with all sorts of strange insects and birds flitting about. The expedition turned into more of a nature hike as they exited the farms and hit some rolling hills.

Soon however they reached their destination. Four stone walls surrounded the strangest temple Maribel had ever seen. It looked like someone had tried to turn a old grain silo into a boat, then beached the thing and slapped a few temple buildings around it. It was by far the ugliest building she'd seen in Gensoukyo.

"Is that the temple?" she asked incredulously.

Keine nodded. "Yes. Remember it was built around the flying grain silo of Myouren."

Renko blinked at it a few more times. "Well, I can believe that."

"Is it safe?" Maribel asked.

Keine nodded. "Oh yes. They keep the temple very well maintained physically and magically. After all hard labor is a good focusing technique."

Maribel supposed there ware stranger looking buildings back at home. Still those looked modern, so you could believe there was a scientific trick keeping them stable. This just looked… patched together.

A woman dressed in simple clothing came to meet them as they entered. "Welcome. It's good to see you Miss Keine, and your guests as well."

Renko squinted slightly as she looked at the girl. The girl smiled and bowed. "Oh! You must be Nue. That's an odd form to pick if you want to look inconspicuous but… Anyway I'm Renko Usami."

The girl jumped backwards in shock. "Eh!"

Maribel bowed as well. "Maribel Hearn." She looked over the girl once again. "Though I don't think it's all that standoffish myself. When'd you see her Renko?"

Renko looked at her with disbelief. "Uh Mary, those wings would stick out, even if she wasn't wearing a short black dress and thigh highs."

"Wings?" Maribel stared at the girl. Then she blinked, and the figure in front of her changed. Simply put Renko had been right. Those asymmetrical wings were very distinct. And she noted with a hint of displeasure, the woman was in fact wearing a very short black dress. She shook that off quickly though.

Nue rubbed her head. "Ehehehe. That's really strange. Looks like my power doesn't work on you. Oh well, I suppose I really shouldn't be obsessing over hiding my true form as much."

Keine lightly coughed. "I hate to interrupt, but could you tell Shou I'm here? We actually came here to get some magical advice."

Nue raised an eyebrow at that. "Eh? Sounds like something interesting's up." The youkai girl smiled. "Go on in. I'll grab Shou."

To Maribel's surprise the girl hopped into the air and then flew into the temple complex.

"I didn't think she'd be able to actually fly with those wings," Maribel said as they walked in after Nue.

Keine's mouth opened in an o of astonishment, then she smiled and shook her head. "That's right. You two don't know how easy it is to fly yet. Most people can do it. However people walk nowadays because flying is seen as a sign of physical weakness among some youkai."

Renko coughed and asked the question they were both thinking, "Er, what about the pantyshots?"

Keine looked confused for a moment. "Pantyshots? Oh! Well, you can't let yourself be restrained by those sort of things too much."

Maribel wasn't sure if she wanted to discard that much of her common sense. She looked over at Renko and they nodded in unspoken agreement.

The inside of the temple was much better construction then its outside. Here the wood all matched, and the beams were solid. The inner temple that Keine lead them to continued the trend, being fairly simple, but very solid. The only really extravagant item in the room was the gold Buddha statue on the alter.

They had just seated themselves when their host entered in a blaze of radiance.

At first Maribel was uncertain if the person who entered was a boy or a girl. But no matter which was correct the robed figure was

stunningly beautiful, with a golden halo. As Maribel's eyes readjusted she became aware, somehow, that what she was seeing was the weakened boundary between god and youkai.

Suddenly she felt a poke in her side. She jumped, then flushed and looked down slightly when she realized Renko must have prodded her for staring.

"Greetings Keine Kameshirasawa, Maribel Hearn, and Renko Usami. I, Shou Toramaru, welcome you to the temple of Myouren." As the woman sat her aura weakened considerably. Maribel felt even more embarrassed when she realized that Nue and two other women had entered the room as well. One was very obviously a Mouse youkai, while the other seemed to be a ghost in a sailor's uniform. "How can we help you?"

Maribel let Keine explain the situation while her heart slowed down. The temple's acting head was pretty, and she had a striking aura of confidence as well, but Maribel's stunned reaction had been purely from the divine power. Yet another annoyance she could thank her eyes for.

Thus when Keine finished Maribel said, "I really need to find someone who can help fast. I don't want to be randomly incapacitated every time there's a weak boundary about."

Shou nodded. "Yes that would be dangerous. Unfortunately I personally have no skill in boundary manipulation. The way of the Buddha is to move past boundaries and definitions, and while in my position as an avatar I will find it difficult to gain such enlightenment, I do not stray from the path either."

Maribel slumped in disappointment. "So I can't get any help here?"

Shou raised her hand. "I can't speak for Ichirin or Byakuren. My strength is my own, but my magic is purely derived from Bishamonten. Ichirin is attempting to ask Byakuren now, so when they arrive you may have more options."

"If you'll forgive me though, I have some questions for you Renko."

"Or rather Nue and Murasa have questions," the mouse youkai said with a smirk.

Murasa laughed and waved the comment off, "I just thought I'd seen her before. Not likely though if you are outsiders."

Renko shook her head. "I know I've never seen a ghost like you before."

Maribel chucked. "We haven't seen many ghosts at all before arriving here. No matter how much we looked."

"I'd like to know what your power is," Nue said. "You shouldn't be able to see through my seed of the unknown form with any illusion piercing magics."

Renko shrugged. "Uh, all I know how to do is figure out where I am and what time it is by looking at the stars. I don't have any other powers."

"Aha! That's where I saw you before!" Murasa pounded her fist into her hand. "You were the woman captain of that boat I sank! That really surprised me. I didn't even realize you were a girl until you'd drowned. Actually managed to save some of the crew before going down with the ship. Real impressive."

Murasa noticed everyone looking at her. "Er, sorry about that by the way. I've stopped doing that."

Renko looked at Maribel. "How come you get to be the reincarnation of the incredibly powerful being that created a mystical world, and I get to be the reincarnation of someone who drowned?"

"How come you get to have eyes that tell the time and see through illusions while mine short circuit my brain," Maribel retorted.

"Now, now calm down," Keine said as she placed her hands on the two girls shoulders.

Maribel flushed again. Obviously the problems with her eyes were making her irritable. "Sorry."

Shou nodded. "I promise you we'll get you help for that problem one way or another. Even if Byakuren can't find a solution, Ichirin and Unzan can escort you to the Hakurei Shrine easily. And they are certain to have a solution."

"That won't be necessary."

Space seemed to tear open. Maribel could see the boundary being manipulated, and she once again saw that strange yet familiar realm. Out of there stepped a kitsune in a blue and white dress. Maribel couldn't see them all, but she somehow knew that there were nine bushy tails behind the woman, and her yellow ears twitched as everyone in the room stood.

"We have a door, Ran," growled Shou.

The kitsune ignored Shou's statement. "I should be able to handle the the girl's teaching myself. After all who alive knows boundaries better then a Yakumo?"

Maribel's eyes narrowed and she breathed a sigh of frustration. "Yakumo." Two sentences, and she already didn't like the fox.

She figured this was going to be a long day.

Authors notes: They were bound to meet eventually.

Anyways we're not done with the palanquin ship crew by a long shot. And Renko's going to get a bit of focus of her own as well.

As for the beginning, and Yukari's plots? Well explaining all of Yukari's plots would take the fun out of it. Let's just say there are a few still in motion.

Chapter 9

Shou apparently saw Maribel's displeasure. "I think you should be asking instead of demanding, Ran. And perhaps also explaining."

Keine turned to face the kitsune. "Indeed. For example, where have you been?"

Ran frowned. "I… I suppose I can explain. You wouldn't realize what's been happening." Maribel edged backwards as the Kitsune pointed straight at her. "This girl has destabilized the barrier."

The room somehow got more tense. However all that tension seemed to be focused at Ran. Maribel stood up straighter. "What exactly does that mean? And how do you know it's my fault?" asked Maribel.

Ran sighed. "Don't all glare at me. I'm not accusing her of anything. The barrier is slowly going back to the state it was supposed to be in!"

A collective gasp came up from the youkai. "Oi! Then why aren't you telling everyone about this!" yelled the mouse youkai.

"Yeah! If everyone knew, then things would go back to the way they were and Byakuren would…" Nue trailed off into silence.

Ran grimaced painfully. "Yeah, that's what I thought too. I've been trying to set things up for the last week or so. But that won't work anymore. People don't trust me." Ran tossed her hands up in exasperation. "Hell, they didn't trust Yukari either. I'm trying to pull off 200 years of social evolution in two hours. I'll need something concrete before anyone will listen to me."

"So you want me as a prop?" Maribel snapped.

Ran's eyes narrowed as she looked into Maribel's eyes. "If necessary? Yes."

Maribel matched the woman's glare. "And if I refuse?"

"Then…"

"Oh Ichirin. You didn't tell me Ran was here as well."

The tension in the room seemed to shatter at the cheery voice coming from the entryway. Mary turned and found herself face to face with a beaming woman in a balck and white dress. Behind her was a Buddhist nun, and what looked to be a pink cloud.

"Hello," the woman said, "I'm Byakuren Hijiri. I'm pleased you came to visit my temple, Maribel." Byakuren then turned to Renko, "And you as well Renko. This is a place that allows humans and youkai to enter freely in a spirit of understanding. I hope you feel comfortable dropping by at any time."

"However right now, I'd like to talk to you about something very important. If you have the time of course." Byakuren put a hand on Maribel's shoulder while smiling at Ran and Renko. "And unfortunately it has to be for your ears only. I'm sorry to interrupt your discussion like that, but I'm sure Shou can keep you company while we're away."

Maribel looked at Renko who gave a quick thumbs up. Keine seemed to be fine with the matter as well so Maribel nodded. "I'd be glad to speak to you for a bit." Anything to get away from that annoying fox girl.

Ran was frowning deeply. "Byakuren, you know what's at stake here."

"Yes, I do know Ran," Byakuren said, before turning back towards the door.

Maribel watches Ran's grimace deepen, then fade. She could almost see the calculations going on behind the fox woman's eyes.

It was not an endearing trait.

Deciding that spending any more time dwelling on the matter was foolish, she waved a quick goodbye to Renko and Keine, and followed Byakuren out the door. The tall woman led her just a little deeper into the ship before opening a side door to a small tea room. "Please have a seat."

Maribel sat down on the small pillow that was probably put there for people like her who didn't practice sitting formally very often. Byakuren closed the door then sat down across from her.

As Maribel finally took the time to study the woman closely, she noticed Byakuren seemed somewhat tired. There were no circles around the eyes, or lines on her face, but she drooped slightly, as if under a heavy weight. It didn't seem to fit with her youth and energy.

"Would you like some tea child?" the magician asked, offering a cup that had just appeared in her hands.

"Yes. Thank you."

Byakuren set the cup in front of Maribel, then produced another one for herself. Maribel took a quick sip to wet her throat.

The tea was… plain. Utterly dull. Though, Maribel supposed she should expect that from a temple. She took a few more sips, then turned her full attention to Byakuren. "So what is so important that even Renko can't hear it."

Byakuren blinked, then smiled slightly. "Oh sorry, I'd forgotten that already. The truth is that there's nothing that really needed to be hidden about our little talk. It's just it will mostly be about you, and your power, and I imagine your friend is getting sick of being the fifth

wheel in these conversations. You can tell her all about it later. Besides, she'll learn more from Shou this way."

Maribel paused, then smiled in return. "That's true, I can't imagine she was enjoying hearing everyone say the world revolved around me all the time. I don't like it either, but at least it makes me sound important."

"The world does not revolve around anyone, but some people change the world more then others," Byakuren stated simply. "Though I feel your friend is still stronger then most. She might be able to become a good magician. Perhaps on Alice's level, or my own."

Byakuren shook her head. "But that's for later. First let's handle your own power."

"You can do that? That would be great!" Maribel shifted a bit in her seat. "I've been troubling Keine and Mokou for the past week, not to mention the pain it causes me. Anything that can help would be good."

"Very well, let me explain your power first," Byakuren set her tea cup to the side and closed her eyes. "The power that both Yukari Yakumo and you wield is the power of boundaries. Within the world of illusions boundaries are the most important power. The Boundary of Death defines Life, and even outside of Gensoukyo, the Boundary of Dreams defines Reality."

"Without limits and boundaries there is nothing, as you see whenever you look at Fujiwara no Moukou. She is neither alive nor dead, but a unique existence. Not fully allowed to live in either realm." Byakuren opened her eyes again. "So all we need to do is change the limit of your powers so that you choose when to see boundaries and when not to."

The two women looked at each other for a minute.

"Um, that's nice and all… but how do I do that?" Maribel asked.

"By reading this spell aloud." Byakuren raised her arms over her head, then pulled them apart in an arc. As she did so a rainbow colored scroll formed in the air, shining brightly throughout the dim room.

Maribel tried to look at the scroll, but the glare caused her eyes to water. "Is there any way to turn that down?"

"You have to endure the light. Don't worry, it's not long."

Maribel gritted her teeth and tried to look at the scroll once again. She tried shielding the light with her hands, but that only made it worse. She tried closing her eyes and reading the red splotches on her retina, but that didn't work either. So in the end she just kept staring and blinking the tears away, until finally she thought she could see the kanji printed on it.

"Namusan!"

Maribel sighed with relief as Byakuren closed the scroll, returning it to where ever it had come from. "Very good."

Maribel rubbed her eyes vigorously. Then took a look around the room. "Um… Did it work?"

Byakuren nodded and waved her hands. This time a window appeared in the air, showing Renko, Ran and Shou chatting about something. "You should now have to concentrate to see the border."

Maribel frowned, then did try to focus her eyes. As she did so the abnormality in the border of space quickly became evident. In fact Maribel thought she saw better then before. Instead of simply seeing the presence of power she saw threads of power forming the alteration in the boundary. Of course that might just be Byakuren's magic.

"This is great! Thank you so much!" Maribel smiled at the magician. "So what kind of spell was that? Can you use it to teach me how to use my abilities in other ways?"

Byakuren coughed lightly. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid that there wasn't a spell at all. If I were to compare it to something I suppose it would be a placebo affect."

"What?" Maribel stared at Byakuren incredulously. "But, you're saying that wasn't a spell? Then how…?"

Byakuren took a sip of her tea. "Explaining it will be both simple and difficult I'm afraid. To start with, I performed no spell. However you altered your own abilities in response to my suggestion."

Maribel thought on that for a moment. "You're saying I could do that all along, I just didn't try hard enough?"

"It's not that simple." Byakuren sighed. "It has to do with your power. All powers are defined by their limits. For example, ones strength is defined by the limit of their lifting capacity. Do you understand?"

Maribel nodded slowly. "I think so."

Byakuren returned the nod and continued. "Your power is the alteration of limits. In short, it was impossible for you to control your powers, but you changed that. Now controlling your power is within your limits."

Maribel, thought about the matter. Then thought about it some more. "Wait. Did I really just give myself the power to control my powers?"

"Yes."

"Isn't that a paradox."

"Somewhat."

Maribel's head was spinning. "So… my power can do whatever I want it to do?"

Byakuren nodded again. "Indeed. You can alter the boundaries of your abilities to do almost anything."

Maribel considered that for a while. "Doesn't that make me omnipotent?"

Byakuren sighed. "No. You see, this is where it gets complicated."

Maribel sipped her tea and listened.

"As I said before, power is defined by boundaries. Without limitations on your power you actually can't do anything." Byakuren held out her hands. "This is true for most magic. I can summon a ball with pure willpower." A ball appeared in the magicians hands. "But if I don't limit the spell to summoning a ball nothing would happen. I can't summon 'something.' I must limit the spell so I'm not just wasting energy."

That made sense, Maribel thought. "So I have to know what I'm doing, and limit myself to a certain level of power?"

Byakuren smiled happily. "Yes. Exactly."

Maribel considered the matter a little more. "So what keeps me from making myself effectively omnipotent?"

"Two things." Byakuren held up two fingers to emphasize the points. "One, you must believe the action is possible. That's why I tricked you into thinking you were casting a spell. Now that you've accessed your abilities voluntarily you believe you can, but before you would have doubted. And that would have prevented you from making the alterations."

"Two, you can only perform actions you comprehend, obviously." Byakuren shrugged. "If you don't know something exists you can't

alter its boundaries."

"Hm…" Maribel nodded. "But it's got to be hard to believe you can change something that you understand very well just by thinking about it."

"Very good." Byakuren rewarded Maribel's insight with another smile. "That's one of the reasons magic is difficult. The other reason is that with magic other people's disbelief actively hampers a spell. That at least is something you don't have to worry about."

Maribel happily took another sip of the tea. She liked Byakuren. In fact the temple just seemed like a friendly place in general. This seemed like a good place to study her power. Especially, she remembered with sudden distaste, since going to the Hakurei Shrine would mean dealing with that fox woman.

In this case to think was to act. "Thank you for the instruction Hijiri-sensei. You seem very knowledgeable about my abilities, would it be possible to study with you?"

Byakuren's eyes widened slightly then her smile softened a bit. "Ah. Trying to avoid having to deal with Ran?"

Maribel grimaced. "Is it that obvious?"

"Yes, though I can understand how her nature can be a little offsetting." Byakuren sighed. "The poor girl has been trying to do the impossible for so long, I'm afraid her social skills have suffered for it. Still she is the best person to teach you how to master boundaries, for whatever purpose you may find for that ability."

Maribel knew it was a little childish, but she couldn't help but ask, "Why?"

Byakuren stared into her cup for a long moment before replying. "I'll explain, because I believe it will do you some good to understand, but I think certain parts will anger you. Because you see, to

understand fully I'll have to explain not only about your power, but also about the sin that was your reincarnation."

"What! My rebirth is a sin?" Maribel couldn't believe what she was hearing, after all the pleasant words Byakuren had started with.

"I'm sorry." Byakuren made a placating gesture. "Perhaps I should start by saying that you are NOT Yukari Yakumo. The fires of hell burnt down to the core of her being, and from that you were created. You are no more her then a plow is the sword that was melted down to forge it."

Maribel's eyes narrowed. "I sense a 'but' there."

Byakuren nodded. "But you do have the same soul. Just as Yukari was burned away, so you will be too upon your death, unless you abandon the self and advance to enlightenment. The essence will remain but the 'you' that will be born will be different."

Maribel nodded. "Okay. So, what does this have to do with me specifically?"

Byakuren sipped her tea. "Part of what is supposed to be burned away is the powers and memories of the past life. They still exist of course, but you should only be able to access them through mystic disciplines." Byakuren pointed at her eyes "You however kept your powers. While sometimes hell makes a mistake, given the people involved in Yukari Yakumo's case, I imagine it was more a breakout."

Maribel felt her face flush with anger. She wanted to squeeze the teacup until it broke. "So I'm going to be punished in the afterlife for something she did?"

"Yes," Byakuren nodded. "Though by that point I imagine there will only be Yukari's stray memories left, so it will be her punishment. However, your reincarnation will still be delayed."

Maribel took a few deep breaths. That was stupid bullshit, but after a few minutes she decided it didn't matter that much how long reincarnation took. After all she'd be dead.

She took a sip of tea to finish calming down then asked, "Okay, I understand that, but what does that have to do with the bossy fox woman?"

"It's because you're a human wielding a youkai's powers." Byakuren folded her hands. "The Hakurei shrine wields the power of boundaries as well, but they use a human power. Ran and Chen are the only people alive who know how to use the youkai power. And if Ran won't teach you Chen won't either."

Maribel stared into her tea. She really didn't want to hear that.

"If you decide not to deal with Ran I'll work with you myself," Byakuren said softly. "For that matter, if you choose to go with Ran, and later decide you don't want to deal with her any more I'll give you my support. But I think it would be best for you if you gave her a chance."

Maribel kept staring at her tea. She didn't like this Ran at all. Perhaps she was overreacting a little. She could admit she was still touchy about the Yakumo thing. But controlling her powers wasn't just a nice ability. It would open the world up to her. Perhaps literally if it let her back through the border.

Finally she sighed. "Alright. I'll talk to her at least. After I go to the Hakurei Shrine."

Byakuren smiled. "Perhaps I can teach you something that will help you there. After all, you already know you can do another trick…"

Renko was proud of Mary when she stood up for herself and walked out on Ran. But now she realized there was a problem with that action. Specifically, she was still here.

'Here,' was in between a tiger youkai that claimed to be the avatar of a god, and a fox youkai that acted like she was a goddess. Worse, they both seemed to have taken an interest in her. And while Keine was still here, the school teacher had whipped out a pencil and was just recording everything.

Ran eventually spoke first. "You have an interesting power. I can't quite place it. It seems to be the opposite of your friend's."

Renko nodded warily. "Thanks? I'm not sure why you'd say that though. I mainly can just see where I am and what time it is."

Ran raised an eyebrow and her ears twitched. "Oh you didn't know? Your eyes also have a centering effect."

"Oh!" Shou placed her fist in her palm. "I see. That's how she saw Nue."

"Indeed," Ran stated.

Great, now they're talking around me, Renko thought. Out loud she said, "So what does that mean."

Ran turned her judgmental gaze back on her and Renko reconsidered her desire to be in the conversation. "It means you don't need to interpret what your eyes tell you. You accept that as real. Which means if what you see IS real to you, you can enforce that reality."

Shou coughed lightly. "Sorry. That's the basic explanation. You don't have to process vision like other people, so you can spend that mental power interpreting the details of what you see, instead of just trying to make sense of light and darkness."

"It's a good trait. You'd make a fine Shikigami." Ran stated.

Renko felt a chill at that statement. "Thanks?"

"Ran was Yukari's shikigami," Keine whispered to her. It wasn't reassuring.

"I'd think you'd be a better magician," Shou said. "You don't seem like the type to serve others unquestioningly."

"Hm… she'd make a terrible magician," Ran stated in her even voice.

Renko was starting to understand Maribel's annoyance. "Why's that!" Renko asked.

For the first time Ran actually blinked and looked her in they eye. "Oh, right you wouldn't know. Good magicians are all insane. You're far too sane to be a good magician. You'd be good with spells of course. But not as a magician."

"Hey!" Renko jumped as the entire crew turned their attention to Ran again. "Byakuren isn't insane!" Murasa yelled at the kitsune.

Ran took the yelling in stride. "She was, back when she was obsessing over keeping herself alive. She's mellowed now, but she's stopped developing new spells too. Now she just steals other peoples spells or sticks to mystic works."

Shou raised her hand and the babble of retorts quieted. "I've heard something similar from Hijiri, but I think you could have phrased that better, Ran."

The kitsune shrugged. "Perhaps."

Renko gave the woman a long look. "Are you trying to make everyone hate you?"

Ran looked away, her ears drooping. "Since you'll end up hating me later, why wait?"

There was a long silence. Murasa and Nazarin continued to glare at Ran. Nue and Unzan looked mildly annoyed (though it was hard to

tell with Unzan). Meanwhile, Keine, Ichirin and Shou looked disappointed.

After a moment Shou sighed and turned her attention back to Renko. The tall woman leaned over and whispered in Renko's ear. "I saw the look you gave me when your friend Maribel was distracted by my aura."

Renko flushed, she opened up her mouth to deny it, but that would only draw attention.

"I don't know if that's just you being a protective friend, or something else, but either way you should stay close to her." Shou continued. "She'll need a friend like you."

"And while you should study magic, if you wish to learn more martial pursuits feel free to come and speak to me. The gatekeeper's techniques are better then mine admittedly, but I can teach you what you need to know in less then 50 years."

Ranko nodded her thanks, then went back to analyzing her actions.

Her thoughts however were interrupted by Mary and Byakuren's return.

Mary came over to her first. "Sorry for the wait Renko."

Renko smiled. "No problem. So, how are we getting to the shrine?"

Mary hesitated a moment, then turned to Ran. "I'll listen to your offer, but I want you to take us to the Hakurei Shrine first."

Ran sneered briefly then shrugged. "Well, now that you mention it, you should speak to them anyway."

Renko tapped her friend on the arm. "Mary, what if she decides to just ditch us somewhere until we agree with her?"

Keine stood up and nodded in agreement. "While normally I wouldn't expect Ran to attack a human, in this case…"

Mary smiled slightly. "I figured out something for that."

With that Mary stared in front of her. After a second her eyes flashed gold and a rip just like the one they had fallen through to the moon appeared in front of her. Then Mary blinked and relaxed, and the rift vanished.

Renko stared in shock. As did everyone else in the room, except Byakuren who simply clapped lightly. "Well done."

Ran was the next person to recover. For the first time she honestly smiled without any rancor. "Clever. Learned that off me when I entered, didn't you? Well I guess I won't need to worry about ferrying you back to the village. Just don't try that to places you haven't seen yet."

"That was awesome Mary," Renko said. "So we can go anywhere you've been?"

Her friend frowned. "Only places I was actually paying attention to."

"Still that's very useful," Keine said. "With that I think you two can go on your own, though if you want me to I can accompany you."

Mary smiled at Renko and gave her a thumbs up, then turned back to Ran confidently. "I think Renko and I can go with Ran by ourselves. For now."

Ran nodded in acquiescence. "I'll be happy to take you to the Hakurei shrine." The kitsune paused for a moment, then her ears folded back. "Er, though I suggest you get some money to donate first." For some reason everyone else in the room nodded solemnly at that.

Mary and Renko blinked. "Why?" asked Renko.

Shou stepped forward and handed Renko a string of coins. "It's better that way. Trust us."

Keine handed Mary a bill. "Most people need armed escort to make it to the shrine. Since they don't get many visitors, those who don't donate are frowned upon."

"Oh," Renko said simply.

Ran stood up straight. "Well now that the donations are covered, let's be off." She waved her hands and a gap once again appeared in space time.

Renko moved over and took Mary's hand. "Sure you don't want to bring Keine?" she asked.

Mary shook her head. "I want to talk to this Ran on her own. In private where she doesn't need to save face as much."

Renko nodded, then bowed to Keine and Shou. "Thanks for bringing us here, Keine. And thanks for the offer Shou."

Mary bowed to Keine and Byakuren. "Thanks for everything."

Byakuren just smiled and bowed, while Keine said, "I'll expect you back for dinner, alright?"

Shou nodded. "May Bishamonten favor you with the strength you need."

"Well if you're done?" Ran said gesturing towards the portal.

Renko adjusted her grip on Mary's hand, then disappeared with her friend into the boundary between spaces.

Authors Notes: And Byakuren makes the save. For now. Still things are slowly coming together.

I was up in the air about whether to put Renko, Ran and Shou's conversation here or with the Shrine Visit. In the end I decided it fit better here, and the segments were about equal length before the assignment. So…

Chapter 10

As she stepped out of the gap Maribel found herself at the top of a long stone stairway. Before her was the Hakurei Shrine of Gensoukyo. Maribel had actually visited the Hakurei shrine in the outside world once. And this place had the same general layout. It had a large open ground surrounded by cherry trees, designed for gatherings and festivals. A central shrine building dominated the grounds, while a smaller storage building sat to the side. There was obviously a garden in the back, and Maribel thought she could see a glimpse of the pool back there.

However it was definitely a different shrine. This shrine was far more run down. It was clean, but it hadn't seen paint in at least 40 years, and the repairs that were keeping the shrine intact and weatherproof were obviously made from local woods taken at random.

And of course instead of a group of people at the shrine there was only a single young miko, probably six or sevenish, carrying a broom. Right now she was looking at them strangely, but as Ran stepped through the young girl smiled. "Oh, you brought them Miss Yakumo."

Maribel saw Ran's ear twitch at 'Miss Yakumo', but the kitsune was smiling. "Hello Kanon. Could you get your mother? These ladies want to speak to her."

"Sure!" The young girl rested her broom on a nearby tree, then dashed off behind the shrine. Maribel looked around for a few more seconds before Ran jerked her head towards the shrine. "Well, pay your respects."

Maribel considered sniping back, but Renko just shrugged and moved to toss in the coins Shou had handed her. After a moment, Maribel decided that the god of the shrine really wasn't responsible for Ran being a pain and moved up to drop her own money in.

The donations thudded dully against dry wood. The two friends winced at the sound. A shrine like this was always kind of sad. "Well, might as well ring the bell," Renko said, and pulled on the shrine rope three times.

The bells sounded cheerfully, right before a woman sped around the corner. She too was dressed as a miko, though she was old enough to be the young miko's mother (and probably was).

She paused and looked at the two girls for a long moment, then over to Ran. She very pointedly ignored the fox youkai and then put on a smile for the two girls. "Welcome to the Hakurei Shrine. Is there anything I can get for you?"

"Yes, uh…" Maribel thought about how exactly to phrase this. "I'm from the outside world you see, and I, um, heard you could help me mastering boundary manipulation."

The woman blinked at her, then pulled out a small orb from her sleeve. After another moment she frowned. "You aren't of my bloodline. How did you come across those powers?"

Maribel hesitated. She was still angry about that particular detail.

"She's the reincarnation of Yukari Yakumo," Renko stated simply from next to her.

Renko held up a placating hand as Maribel turned towards her, "Yeah I know, but it's the best way to explain things. Don't worry about it so much. You're still Mary."

Maribel sighed. Renko was right. "Yeah, I guess that is the short version."

The woman's eyes narrowed and she glanced back at the kitsune. "I see." Ran bowed in acknowledgment. "Trying to avoid getting shanghaied into becoming a youkai, eh?"

"Huh?" Maribel and Renko replied in unison.

Ran stepped forward. "Actually she wanted to speak to you before hearing my offer."

The woman looked disdainfully at Ran then nodded once. "Very well." She turned and yelled towards the back, "Kanon! Please make some tea for our guests!"

The little girl's voice shouted back, "Okay!"

"Then please finish the sweeping, Kanon!" The woman turned back to her guests. "I am Hitomi Hakurei, preistess of the Hakurei shrine. If you two would follow me…?"

Ran turned away. "I'll wait for you here," she said.

Not wanting to question her good fortune Maribel simply followed Hitomi to the back of the shrine where there was a small house. The three women sat around the small table inside, and the young miko, Kanon, cheerfully came poured them all some tea before jumping back outside.

The three sat and sipped their tea while Maribel gave the summary of their journeys again. She was getting fairly good at it, given all the practice.

Then Renko spoke up. "So, can you help Mary?"

Hitomi tapped her foot a few times before speaking, "Hm… I'm not exactly sure what to say on that matter. First, why me instead of Ran?"

Maribel considered being polite for a moment, then decided against it. "Because I don't like her."

Hitomi smirked at the comment, "I can understand that, but then I want to ask, why do you want to master boundary manipulation? I hate my job, but it's the only one I can do in addition to my other

duties, so I don't need another youkai hunter in competition with me. And it doesn't have much other use."

Maribel opened her mouth then shut it again. That was a good question.

Byakuren insinuated she could have world shattering power, and while that was nice in an abstract sort of way, it really wasn't something Maribel was looking for. What did she really want to do?

She had her answer the second she looked outside and caught a glimpse of the barrier that gave the shrine it's name. "I want to be able to visit home."

Hitomi looked startled at her statement, but Renko nodded her approval. They'd both searched for Gensoukyo for years, and Maribel was certain Renko wanted to live here, even if the plumbing was terrible and there was no cable. But they'd always imagined there would be a way back. That their family would hear about their lives in this new world, and that they could pop out for Christmas, or maybe a bite of pizza.

And while Maribel could live without the pizza, she didn't want her family wondering where she'd disappeared to for the rest of their lives.

Hitomi recovered then shook her head sadly. "I… understand that desire. But I'm afraid I can't help you there. Even when the border was weak, my family's power was unable to move through the barrier. Our power is the power of sealing, of stability. That's why Yukari Yakumo needed our help in the first place, to create the seal, along with the power of a dragon to pull the whole thing off. Her power is the power of defining, of chaos. Without our work the barrier would collapse under the weight of the paradox it bears. Without Yukari, well… I imagine as outsiders you've been told what happened without her."

Maribel's heart sank. "So, you can't help me then?"

"I'm very sorry." Hitomi said, "I could teach you how to use your powers to a minor degree, but I can't teach you how to move through the border."

Renko patted her hand, and Maribel smiled at her friend. They hadn't used up all their options yet.

Renko then turned to Hitomi, "So what was that about Ran wanting to turn Maribel into a youkai? Do you know what she's planning?"

A shadow fell over Hitomi's face. "Because she needs your friend alive, as long as possible. A human lifespan won't do. And what Ran needs, she'll do anything to get."

After a long pause Hitomi said, "Still… she might have a way to help you. I know both Ran and her Shikigami used to be able to cross the border."

Hitomi continued staring into her teacup. Eventually Maribel asked, "So what would you suggest I do?"

Hitomi seemed to deflate. "I… can't answer you fairly. I don't like the idea of a human becoming a youkai. I hate them too much for that. But… soon I'll have to retire." She looked up at Maribel with haunted eyes. "I don't want my daughter to have to go through that."

She took a deep breath. "So while I hate youkai, if you could bring back the peace of my ancestors times, I would be grateful."

Maribel rubbed her forehead. "I seems like every time I look for a better solution there isn't one. I don't really have a choice do I?"

"No." Hitomi's voice sharpened a little. "You always have a choice. And you always have more choices then the ones you see at first glance." Her expression softened. "I just can't offer you a better one myself."

Maribel sighed. Renko gripped her hand again. "Don't worry Mary. I'll help think of something too."

Maribel smiled but her worry only faded a little. This was turning out to be a long day.

Kanon wished she could have stayed with the new girls and her mommy and listened to their conversation, but mommy was really strict about Kanon staying away from business until she was older. And Kanon was almost 7 now! Surely, she'd be able to hear those conversations soon.

Still there was something else for her to do, even if she couldn't listen to the grown up conversation. She could talk to her fluffy aunt!

She worked her way over to where the kitsune was pacing. "How have you been doing Miss Yakumo?"

Ran smiled a Kanon and patted her on the head. "I've been busy, but it's a good kind of busy." She then looked at Kanon seriously. "And have you been good and keeping up with your studies?"

"Uh huh!" Kanon nodded eagerly. Admittedly she might have kinda skipped that history session, and she hadn't tried too hard with all those exercises. But she'd been mostly good so she could say she was good right?

Ran smiled again. "Then you can have a treat." The fox woman held out a small hard candy which Kanon graciously accepted.

"Thank you!"

As she popped the candy in her mouth she once again wondered if mommy and Ran were fighting. They did that a lot, especially since daddy had died. She didn't like how they fought but neither of them would tell her why so she could fix it. They kept telling her to wait until she was older.

That gave her an idea. "Hey Miss Yakumo, when will I be older?"

Ran blinked in surprise then laughed. "Sorry Kanon, I don't know human ages that well. Maybe when you're thirteen?"

Kanon frowned as she finished off the candy. Getting to thirteen was going to take forever!

Ran laughed again. "Now now don't make that face, it'll be sooner then you think I'm sure. Anyway it looks like you have a guest, you don't want to show your guest such a pouty face"

"Eh!" Kanon looked back to where Ran was pointing and saw the cat that always came around. "Kitty!"

Kanon ran over to the cat and dropped to the ground in front of it, so they could touch noses. She laughed when the twin tailed black cat licked her face. "Ahahaha! Silly girl, my nose doesn't need a bath." She giggled again and fell on her back as the cat pounced on her. "Did you bring the kittens?" she asked hopefully, but the cat just yawned and purred.

Still one cat was fine too. She managed to get the cat off her chest and chasing a cattail when it suddenly paused, gave her a final head rub while purring, then ran into the forest. Kanon was a little disappointed, but she knew what that meant. Sure enough her mom and the guests came out a second later.

Kanon quickly grabbed a broom and pretended to be sweeping again as they spoke.

Miss Ran said, "So do you still wish to hear my offer?"

The blond woman nodded, "Yes, unless you want to call it a day first Renko."

The woman with the cool hat shook her head. "Nah, it's still early. Might as well get it done with right Mary?"

"Good," Ran said. "Then let's adjourn to Mayohiga to finish discussing the matter." She bowed to mommy, "Thank you for allowing us to visit."

Mommy just gave Ran a nod, which wasn't very polite, but she bowed more deeply to the other guests. "Please come visit the Hakurei Shrine again."

"Well will, thank you." The two women bowed in return then they followed Miss Ran through one of her gap things.

Mommy looked at the place where the gap was for a long time, then walked over and hugged Kanon tightly. A little too tightly, but she relaxed a little when Kanon squirmed.

Now that she wasn't being squeezed Kanon returned the hug, but she couldn't help but ask, "Why are you hugging me Mommy?"

"Just because darling," was mommy's reply.

After a few seconds mommy slowly released her. "Alright, do you want to check the donation box?"

"Hooray!" Kanon ran for the box to see what treasures were hidden inside this time.

Authors Notes: Next, the finale. Of the intro book.

Here human lifespans worked against me, and I was forced to compensate. I think the two Hakurei descendants turned out decently well however.

I'm surprised at how much foreshadowing I tossed into this segment. I gotta keep writing so I can get to the payoff.

Chapter 11

As Maribel entered the area she briefly wondered if Ran had made a mistake and brought them back to the village. However the lack of people quickly convinced her this was a different place altogether.

"Welcome to Mayohiga, please refrain from stealing our dinnerware," Ran said as she stepped down the street. She looked around a bit before calling out "CHEN!"

"Ah, yes Miss Ran!" Maribel blinked as a girl who appeared to be in her late teens dashed around a corner. The girl ran over and hugged the kitsune tightly, then just as quickly let go and turned her full attention on Maribel.

Now that 'Chen' had stopped moving Maribel could clearly see the two cat ears and tails that marked her as a Nekomata. The way she rapidly switched focus between Renko and Maribel just cemented her cat like nature.

After a quick inspection Chen nodded. "So this is the girl and her friend? Well I suppose she has the same hat."

Maribel frowned. "Hey! It's a good hat!"

Renko coughed beside her.

Ran sighed and smiled. "So how'd it go?"

Chen whirled around. "Just like you thought it would. Wriggle's not that interested but Rumia's all for it. Wriggle did tell me that Yamame might be interested though. And she can tell which humans are diseased and which are safe to eat."

Maribel suddenly realized what they were talking about. "Wait, are you kidnapping humans outside the border for food?"

The two animal youkai looked at her with surprise, then Chen laughed. "Don't you need to be alive to be kidnapped?"

"Indeed," said Ran. "Why would we hunt humans when we can just grab the bodies? Corpses are plentiful and they don't fight back. Those pistol bullets tend to sting, and police inquiries can cause all sorts of annoyances."

Maribel exchanged a look with Renko. "Well I suppose that's better then the alternatives…" Renko said.

Ran shrugged. "Anyways, that's tangential to our business."

"Right. Then I guess the first question is, what exactly do you want?" Maribel asked.

"I want to train you in your powers," Ran said simply. "No offense, but right now you can't actually offer me anything."

Renko spoke up. "But what are you going to ask for later?"

"Nothing. There's very little she can offer me that she isn't already offering me," Ran looked at both of the girls. "I mainly wish to grant her the abilities to survive in Gensoukyo."

Maribel shook her head. "You need me alive so I keep destabilizing the barrier. A figurehead for your youkai social project, with me becoming a youkai as well, right?"

Ran was a silent a moment before nodding. "There are other ways of giving you a lifespan actually worth talking about, but yes. I mostly just want to keep you alive."

Chen's tails lashed around as she looked between her master and the two girls. "That's not a bad thing though right? Being alive is good."

"In addition there are other benefits to your powers," Ran said calmly. "While I won't claim it will give you everything you want, you'll

definitely have no financial worries, and you'll be free to travel about Gensoukyo."

Maribel stared Ran straight in the eyes. "What if I said that I wanted to learn how to go outside the barrier?"

"I'd tell you that's impossible except for a youkai. A human can't make the trip out," Ran replied with a straight face.

However Chen's ears twitched.

"You're lying," Maribel said in a cold rage.

Ran shrugged and smirked infuriatingly. "Perhaps, but that's the only answer you'll get from me either way."

Maribel trembled. She'd had it. She was tired of mystical excuses, dead ends and insinuations that she was supposed to play along with someone else's game. Especially since that someone else was supposed to be dead! She wasn't going to take this shit anymore.

"Mary!" Renko yelled behind her.

Renko's voice snapped her out of her mindless rage, halfway through her swing at Ran.

However, her human speed wasn't enough. The kitsune effortlessly blocked her slap. "What have we learned?" the fox woman asked in a bored voice.

Once again Maribel's vision blurred red. She wanted to slap that bored expression so badly! She swung again, this time demanding that her blow reach it's target.

Ran shifted her arm to block again.

And the boundary between the two twisted.

Maribel's arm phased right through Ran's, and she felt a surge of power. The open hand slap whipped Ran's head to the side with a loud crack. The kitsune took a step back, stunned, as Maribel's anger subsided.

"Mary!" Renko yelled again behind her.

"Miss Ran!" cried Chen, as she ran between the two women. The nekomata gave Maribel a angry glare. "How could you! Miss Ran was offering you everything she could!"

"Like hell!" Maribel yelled back. "She's been evasive and manipulative every second she's been around me!" Maribel was about to keep yelling when Renko gripped her shoulder, so instead she took a few deep breaths.

Chen stood her ground. "She's just doing what she has to do to save Gensoukyo. Even though everyone blames her because she has to follow all their rules. Even though we can't manipulate the border like Yukari can…"

"If it's so damn important, then maybe she could show a little more humility instead of just ordering me about," Maribel snapped.

Ran slowly pulled herself fully upright rubbing the slap mark Maribel had left. She glared at Maribel for a long moment. "I… I don't need… to…" She swallowed and her ears flipped back.

Then the kitsune's eyes turned down, and her tails drooped behind her. Before everyone's shocked gaze, she slowly fell to her knees and prostrated herself on the ground. "I… I beg of you."

Chen stepped backwards in shock. "Miss Ran…"

"Even with the barrier we can't exist without the outside world. Without a connection the outside world will start to forget us." Ran pushed herself up a little, but the fox woman couldn't seem to lift her eyes off the ground. "We can live on disbelief, but if we are

completely forgotten this world won't just vanish. It will never have existed."

"I~" Ran's voice broke, and she took an audible breath, "I can't let this happen to my family… to Chen. So I beg you. I'll do anything. Riches… power… anything. If you demand it, I'll become your personal servant. But please, help me save this world." Ran's face was still to the ground, but her body shivered with shame and grief, while Chen was obviously fighting back tears.

Maribel felt ill.

She looked back at Renko to see if her friend had any idea what to do, but Renko seemed just as helpless.

Finally she kneeled down to bring herself closer to the fallen woman. "I don't want a servant. I just want some straight answers. If you can give me that I swear I'll do my best to help you."

Ran took a few deep breaths before pulling herself to her knees. She still couldn't seem to raise her eyes or ears, but she'd stopped shaking. "Very well."

"Is it possible for me to leave Gensoukyo, just for a little while? I know you two can pop in and out of the border now."

Ran closed her eyes and said simply, "I don't know. I know you can leave, but I think that being outside would both weaken your powers and strengthen the barrier. I don't believe you'd be able to return. But I can't be sure anymore."

Maribel didn't like the ambiguity there, but Ran sounded sincerely uncertain. "Anymore? What changed your mind?"

Ran managed to look up at her face. "That slap. When you altered the boundaries between us. Yukari would never have even considered that. It was impossible to our minds." The kitsune

seemed almost awed. "You have the power of a youkai, but the mind of a human. I can't say what you are capable of."

"So you're saying I might be able to find a way for me to move back and forth on my own?" Maribel asked.

"It's possible. You'd need training of course." Ran managed a very weak smile. "That trick you used there was very dangerous. The reason you managed to hurt me at all was because blending us together allowed you to take some of my power."

"Uh…" Renko moved opposite Chen to look at the two kneeling women. "Forgive me if I'm wrong, but you're saying that Mary can't come back because the border would become too strong again right?"

Ran nodded.

Renko looked embarrassed. "So wouldn't it still be possible to go somewhere that doesn't have as strong a barrier, then teleport or whatever to Gensoukyo? Like how we came here via the moon?"

Maribel considered that. Then she felt incredibly stupid. "Why didn't I think of that?"

Ran's ears drooped again. "Why didn't *I* think of that?"

Chen on the other hand just laughed. "You're pretty smart Miss Renko! You'd be an awesome Shikigami!"

"Er, thanks," Renko replied.

Maribel's spirits rose. "So it'll work!"

"Yes." Ran replied. "The moon is definitely off limits, but realms like Makai are relatively safe to pass through, and fairly easy to access."

'We can go home again!' The thought burned its way across Maribels mind. She laughed happily and hugged Renko closely. This was how

she wanted to live in Gensoukyo. Idyllic lifestyle, but with some batteries for her music player and a way to call her parents. It may be selfish, but it was what she'd dreamed of.

Sadly the current reality crashed down on her again. She turned back to where Ran was still kneeling. "So I guess our other problem is, do you still demand that I become a youkai?"

Ran took in a deep breath and let it out in a massive sigh. "I… don't know that either. It's possible as a human you'll be able to think of something Yukari couldn't and make it so the barrier is always properly weakened. Or maybe your human mind won't be able to comprehend the barrier at all. I know most humans have a problem doing things like calculating the width of the Sanzu River, or performing 5 variable calculus in their heads."

Ran slowly rocked herself back to her feet. "It's not like you can just become a youkai in two days anyway. It would take at least ten years to master the concepts required." Ran looked downcast again. "And to tell the truth, I'm not sure it would even work if you didn't want it to."

Maribel looked at the women. "You really had no other options did you?"

Ran shook her head. "None I wanted to use." She looked down again. "And I'm tired, very tired, of forcing people to do what's best for Gensoukyo. That vampire may enjoy being the villain, but I don't."

The kitsune dusted off her clothes then gestured to one of the nearby houses. "I know you'll want to return to the village for dinner soon, but perhaps you would like to stay for tea, and discuss this further?"

"Sure thing," Renko said.

The house Ran led them into seemed to be a comfy well furnished place. Ran gestured to the table then moved towards the kitchen.

After a second Chen spoke up, "Um, Miss Ran. I'm the shikigami. Shouldn't you let me handle it?"

Ran paused, her mouth opening in an "o" of surprise. Then she smiled. "That's okay Chen. I'll get the tea this time." With that she disappeared into the kitchen.

Chen started chewing her lip. "Nyah. Not again."

Maribel was slightly confused, but Renko seemed to catch on. "She does this when she's stressed?"

"Yeah." Chen sighed. "She totally forgets she's not serving Miss Yukari and tries to do all the housework by herself." Chen's tails swished violently as she glared lightly at Maribel.

"Don't worry, I'm not looking to make anyone my servant," Maribel said as she waved Chen off. The nekomata seemed mollified by the comment. "But I do want to know something." Chen's ears perked up, and Maribel found herself searching for a polite way to ask about the matter, but she couldn't find one. "Um… why was she being such a bitch? If she doesn't want to be seen as the villain why was she trying to annoy everyone?"

Chen's ears folded back and she looked sad. "You met Hitomi right?"

The two girls nodded. "Yeah."

"Ran was the one that trained her," Chen said. "You see, Hitomi's aunt, the previous Hakurei maiden, quit. She decided she didn't want to be the sole priestess of a small shrine."

"The gods on the mountain tried to take the shrine over again," Chen said, "And this time they might have done it too, since their shrine maiden has the Hakurei bloodline as well. But we couldn't let those gods take the shrine's faith. It would put the border in danger."

"So Ran found a distant relative who was fairly strong and made her the new maiden. That was Hitomi. Ran trained her personally. She was really nice about it, the same way she was when she trained me.."

Chen sighed. "Gensoukyo needs a Hakurei maiden. But the Hakurei shrine isn't really self sufficient. The only faith they get is from the youkai exterminations they do." Chen shook her head. "So when the shrine was running low on faith, Ran had to send Hitomi on a mission."

"Except we made a mistake. Hitomi was too young and not prepared to have to fight for her life. She just barely survived that. She's done better since, but she never really adjusted to having to fight youkai to the death to earn a living."

Chen looked up and sighed again. "So she's hated Ran ever since. And Ran blames herself for not giving Hitomi more strict training."

Suddenly Chen's eyes got wide and her tails bristled. "Uh, don't tell Ran I told you that! She hates giving excuses."

"Sure thing," Renko said.

Maribel just looked out into the courtyard outside the house. She understood why Ran had been such a bitch before now, though she didn't think that excused her actions. She wondered if these complications were from the recent troubles, or if she had been unreasonable in thinking Gensoukyo had been more of a utopia in the past.

Soon Ran walked back into the room with the tea. She seemed to have recovered a lot from her breakdown in the streets, though Maribel noticed her tails were still a little limp, but her smile, while weak, didn't seem forced at all. She set the teapot down, and allowed Chen to pour.

"So do you two have jobs yet?" Ran asked. "Or were you still looking around?"

"Still looking," Renko replied. "I guess our days are kind of free."

Ran nodded. "I see. While that will be good to start, I'd suggest you get a side job as well. While I don't have a problem giving you two a stipend, even when human-youkai relations were at their best people who learned magic exclusively were considered somewhat dangerous."

"Do you have any suggestions?" Maribel couldn't help but ask.

Ran simply shrugged. "Not really. It's not like Mayohiga lacks funds so you don't need to worry about being poor. Do what you want."

"I assume since you're including both of us that you'll be teaching me magic as well," Renko asked.

"Yes," Ran sat up a little straighter. "While you might want another tutor later, Chen and I are masters of Black Magic. We both are using magic to emulate Yukari's abilities after all. Since we don't have innate power of boundaries. And it's best if you have a similar level of power with your friends. Otherwise more unscrupulous people might try using you against them."

Maribel rocked back. As she stared at Ran the kitsune turned her full attention to her, "Yes Maribel, there are some things I won't stoop to."

Renko's eyes opened wide as she realized what Ran was insinuating, then she frowned. "Yeah. I want in on those lessons. I'm not going to be the damsel in distress here."

Ran breathed in the steam from her tea, then took a sip. "So would tomorrow afternoon be a good time for you two? I know you're probably still getting your legs, but there are certain skills I think you should learn quickly."

Maribel looked at Renko who shrugged in return. Well it wasn't like they were doing anything anyway. "I suppose that's fine. Do you intend to pick us up?"

Ran nodded. "Yes. It's a little difficult to get to Mayohiga. I expect you can learn it in a day, but there's something more important for you to learn first."

"What would that be?" Renko asked.

Ran smiled. "Tomorrow I'm going to teach you two how to fly. So you can view all of Gensoukyo as it's meant to be seen."

The rest of the day seemed like a blur, but it was still somehow calm. They returned to Keine's house, ate dinner with her and Mokou (without the blinding headache part) then took a bath and started getting ready for bed.

The reason for that came to her when she was lying in bed, staring out the small window at the stars. "I think this is the first time since we came here that I finally feel in control of things."

Renko turned to her. "Hm… Yeah, I guess so." Renko turned back to the window. "I guess I still feel a little redundant. Maybe that'll go away if I find a job."

Mary considered the matter. "Maybe. Are you planning on going into astronomy, like Keine suggested?"

Renko shrugged. "Don't know. Maybe I'll try my hand at teaching actually. There's no way that Keine can teach all the higher education students and still have time for the kids. And I know more about math and physics then the tutor currently working does, so I'd have a niche in the market."

Maribel just nodded. That was something that Renko would figure out, she was sure.

"You know though, we haven't solved the biggest problem yet," Renko said.

"What's that?" Maribel asked.

"We'll have to find an explanation for where we disappeared to that our parents will accept," Renko said with a smile.

Maribel laughed and rolled her eyes. "I was just going to tell the truth. It's not like they could deny the evidence, and they aren't foolish enough to tell anyone else."

Renko smirked. "That's easy for you to pull off. You'll have the magic powers." Renko gave an exaggerated sigh. "I'll probably just have to say we eloped. My parents will believe it. They've been wondering for some time about that 'Mary girl.'"

Maribel felt warmth run through her cheeks. Married? To Renko? Her brain wasn't up for finding a proper response to that.

So she settled for throwing her pillow at her friend. "If you're going to claim we're married at least learn how to say my name right, Renko!"

The two girls laughed and talked well into the night.

Authors Notes: And that's the end of the first section. And on a Thanksgiving no less. I assure you all I didn't plan that, but it turned out nicely. I hope you enjoyed it, and I'm hammering my way through the second part right now, to get it to you all. However, I'm once again planning on finishing (and editing) that in advance before I start posting so it may be a little longer.

There'll be a time skip between this section and the next. And I figured I'd also add the answers to some of the questions I was asked about the groups that didn't make as big an appearance.

How is Chireiden doing? Don't they still have the link with the Moriya Shrine they had in Hisoutensoku, or did that cease with the rest of Gensokyo's degraded alliances?

Chireiden in a general sense is actually doing perfectly well. This comes after Cats and Crows so Utsuho is a full goddess in her own right, and is powering the underground. With that, and the fact that Chireiden is slightly out of synch with Gensoukyo as the former hell, Chireiden pretty much has just been getting better and better.

However. since most of the underground youkai are despised by the above ground youkai for their powers most of the citizens of the Underground just don't leave. There are a few exceptions of course, but most stay at home and the majority of Gensoukyo (not the houses, but unaligned youkai) would pester them if they didn't.

Meanwhile the Tengu started locking down the mountain, the Kappa didn't resist, and the Moriya shrine became fairly isolated. While the goddesses aren't on bad terms with anyone, they can't really act within Gensoukyo without causing a war with the Tengu and losing their biggest source of faith. Utsuho and Orin still pop up and chat, and Kanako and Suwako occasionally drop in, but do to each parties isolation they can't do much other then sit about and drink tea.

And what is the connection between the Kotiya and Hakurei lines, exactly?

The two lines generally intermarried, given their constant contact and the fact that male Hakurei priests couldn't inherit. Hitomi and Kanon are decendants of Suwako, and the current Moriya shrine maiden has enough of the Hakurei line to maintain the border and use the yin yang orbs.

However the families are at odds again. Early on after the troubles started about half the Hakurei family switched to serving Kanako and Suwako as their primary deities. Worried that the boundary would be in danger if their faith switched, the Hakurei maiden at the time disowned them and destroyed the Moriya branch shrine. Further

escalation was stopped by the relative weakness of the two powers, and the fact that the Tengu held the space between the two shrines. The enmity has died down, but the families are no longer close.

Anyway thanks again for reading, and I hope to have the second 'book' ready soon.